

Oliver Sacks: The Feeling of Disorder

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Joseph Lelyveld: Axelrod's Confessions



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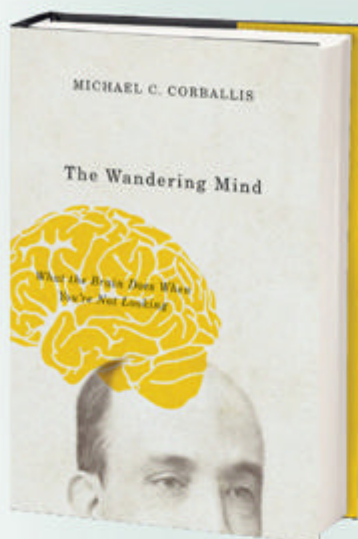


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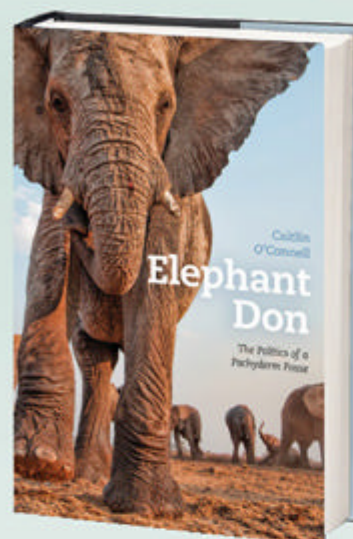
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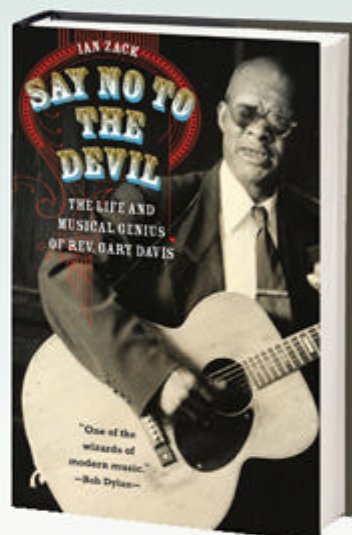
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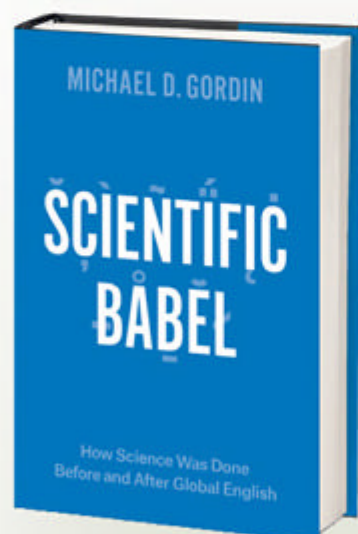
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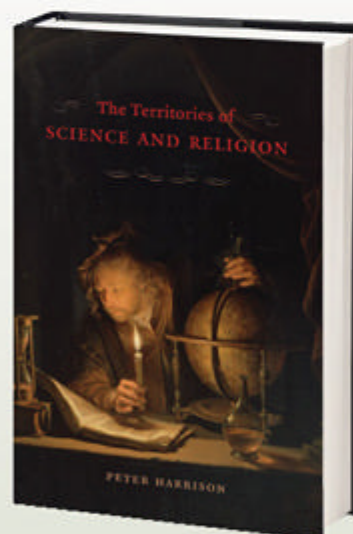
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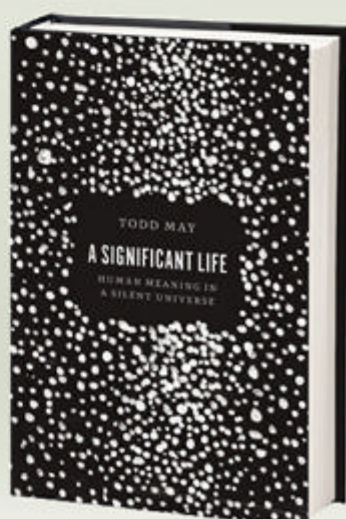
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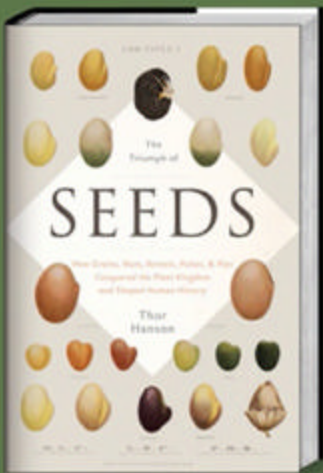
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A General Feeling of Disorder

Oliver Sacks

1.

Nothing is more crucial to the survival and independence of organisms—be they elephants or protozoa—than the maintenance of a constant internal environment. Claude Bernard, the great French physiologist, said everything on this matter when, in the 1850s, he wrote, “*La fixité du milieu intérieur est la condition de la vie libre.*” Maintaining such constancy is called homeostasis. The basics of homeostasis are relatively simple but miraculously efficient at the cellular level, where ion pumps in cell membranes allow the chemical interior of cells to remain constant, whatever the vicissitudes of the external environment. More complex monitoring systems are demanded when it comes to ensuring homeostasis in multicellular organisms—animals, and human beings, in particular.

Homeostatic regulation is accomplished by the development of special nerve cells and nerve nets (plexuses) scattered throughout our bodies, as well as by direct chemical means (hormones, etc.). These scattered nerve cells and plexuses become organized into a system or confederation that is largely autonomous in its functioning; hence its name, the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS was only recognized and explored in the early part of the twentieth century, whereas many of the functions of the central nervous system (CNS), especially the brain, had already been mapped in detail in the nineteenth century. This is something of a paradox, for the autonomic nervous system evolved long before the central nervous system.

They were (and to a considerable extent still are) independent evolutions, extremely different in organization, as well as formation. Central nervous systems, along with muscles and sense organs, evolved to allow animals to get around in the world—forage, hunt, seek mates, avoid or fight enemies, etc. The central nervous system, with its sense organs (including those in the joints, the muscles, the movable parts of the body), tells one who one is and what one is doing. The autonomic nervous system, sleeplessly monitoring every organ and tissue in the body, tells one how one is. Curiously, the brain itself has no sense organs, which is why one can have gross disorders here, yet feel no malaise. Thus Ralph Waldo Emerson, who developed Alzheimer’s disease in his sixties, would say, “I have lost my mental faculties but am perfectly well.”

By the early twentieth century, two general divisions of the autonomic nervous system were recognized: a “sympathetic” part, which, by increasing the heart’s output, sharpening the senses, and tensing the muscles, readies an animal

for action (in extreme situations, for instance, life-saving fight or flight); and the corresponding opposite—a “parasympathetic” part—which increases activity in the “housekeeping” parts of the body (gut, kidneys, liver, etc.), slowing the heart and promoting relaxation and sleep. These two portions of the ANS work, normally, in a happy reciprocity; thus the delicious postprandial somnolence that follows a heavy meal is not the time to run a race or get into a fight. When the two parts of the ANS are working harmoniously together, one feels “well,” or “normal.”

No one has written more eloquently about this than Antonio Damasio in



Newcastle Beach, New South Wales, Australia, 2000; photograph by Trent Parke

his book *The Feeling of What Happens* and many subsequent books and papers. He speaks of a “core consciousness,” the basic feeling of *how one is*, which eventually becomes a dim, implicit feeling of consciousness.¹ It is especially when things are going wrong, internally—when homeostasis is not being maintained; when the autonomic balance starts listing heavily to one side or the other—that this core consciousness, the feeling of *how one is*, takes on an intrusive, unpleasant quality, and now one will say, “I feel ill—something is amiss.” At such times one no longer *looks* well either.

As an example of this, migraine is a sort of prototype illness, often very unpleasant but transient, and self-limiting; benign in the sense that it does not cause death or serious injury and that it is not associated with any tissue damage or trauma or infection; and occurring only as an often-hereditary disturbance of the nervous system. Migraine provides, in miniature, the essential features of *being ill*—of trouble inside the body—without actual illness.

¹Antonio Damasio and Gil B. Carvalho, “The Nature of Feelings: Evolutionary and Neurobiological Origins,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, Vol. 14 (February 2013).

When I came to New York, nearly fifty years ago, the first patients I saw suffered from attacks of migraine—“common migraine,” so called because it attacks at least 10 percent of the population. (I myself have had attacks of them throughout my life.²) Seeing such patients, trying to understand or help them, constituted my apprenticeship in medicine—and led to my first book, *Migraine*.

Though there are many (one is tempted to say, innumerable) possible presentations of common migraine—I described nearly a hundred such in my book—its commonest harbinger may be just an indefinable but undeniable feeling of *something amiss*. This is exactly what Emil du Bois-Reymond emphasized when, in 1860, he described his own attacks of migraine: “I wake,”

I cite du Bois-Reymond’s self-description, as I do at the very beginning of *Migraine*, partly for its precision and beauty (as are common in nineteenth-century neurological descriptions, but rare now), but above all, because it is *exemplary*—all cases of migraine vary, but they are, so to speak, permutations of his.

The vascular and visceral symptoms of migraine are typical of unbridled parasympathetic activity, but they may be preceded by a physiologically opposite state. One may feel full of energy, even a sort of euphoria, for a few hours *before* a migraine—George Eliot would speak of herself as feeling “dangerously well” at such times. There may, similarly, especially if the suffering has been very intense, be a “rebound” *after* a migraine. This was very clear with one of my patients (Case #68 in *Migraine*), a young mathematician with very severe migraines. For him the resolution of a migraine, accompanied by a huge passage of pale urine, was always followed by a burst of original mathematical thinking. “Curing” his migraines, we found, “cured” his mathematical creativity, and he elected, given this strange economy of body and mind, to keep both.

While this is the general pattern of a migraine, there can occur rapidly changing fluctuations and contradictory symptoms—a feeling that patients often call “unsettled.” In this unsettled state (I wrote in *Migraine*), “one may feel hot or cold, or both... bloated and tight, or loose and queasy; a peculiar tension, or languor, or both... sundry strains and discomforts, which come and go.”

Indeed, everything comes and goes, and if one could take a scan or inner photograph of the body at such times, one would see vascular beds opening and closing, peristalsis accelerating or stopping, viscera squirming or tightening in spasms, secretions suddenly increasing or decreasing—as if the nervous system itself were in a state of indecision. Instability, fluctuation, and oscillation are of the essence in the unsettled state, this general feeling of disorder. We lose the normal feeling of “wellness,” which all of us, and perhaps all animals, have in health.

2.

If new thoughts about illness and recovery—or old thoughts in new form—have been stimulated by thinking back to my first patients, they have been given an unexpected salience by a very

he writes, “with a general feeling of disorder...”

In his case (he had had migraines every three to four weeks, since his twentieth year), there would be “a slight pain in the region of the right temple which... reaches its greatest intensity at midday; towards evening it usually passes off.... At rest the pain is bearable, but it is increased by motion to a high degree of violence.... It responds to each beat of the temporal artery.” Moreover, du Bois-Reymond *looked* different during his migraines: “The countenance is pale and sunken, the right eye small and reddened.” During violent attacks he would experience nausea and “gastric disorder.” The “general feeling of disorder” that so often inaugurates migraines may continue, getting more and more severe in the course of an attack; the worst-affected patients may be reduced to lying in a leaden haze, feeling half-dead, or even that death would be preferable.³

²I also have attacks of “migraine aura,” with scintillating zigzag patterns and other visual phenomena. They, for me, have no obvious relation to my “common” migraines, but for many others the two are linked, this hybrid attack being called a “classical” migraine.

³Arætaeus noted in the second century that patients in such a state “are weary of

life and wish to die.” Such feelings, while they may originate, and be correlated with, autonomic imbalance, must connect with those “central” parts of the ANS in which feeling, mood, sentience, and (core) consciousness are mediated—the brainstem, hypothalamus, amygdala, and other subcortical structures.



The Age of Sustainable Development

JEFFREY D. SACHS

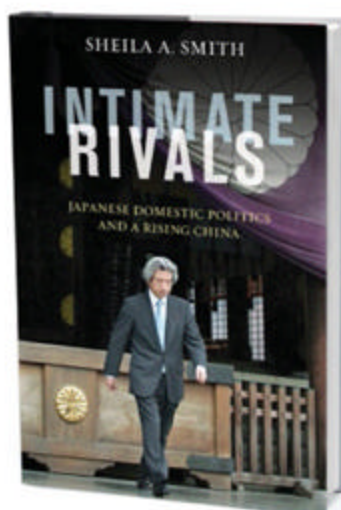
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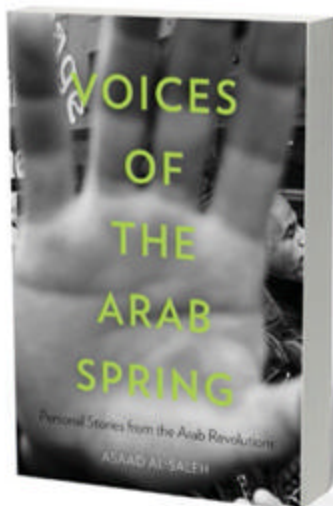
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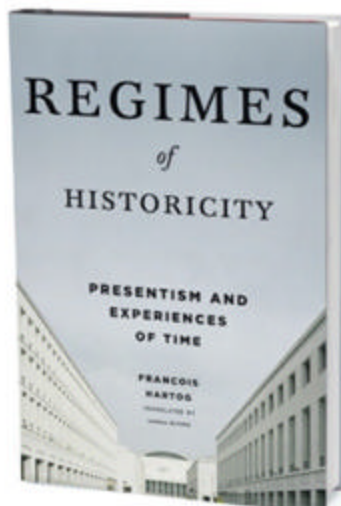
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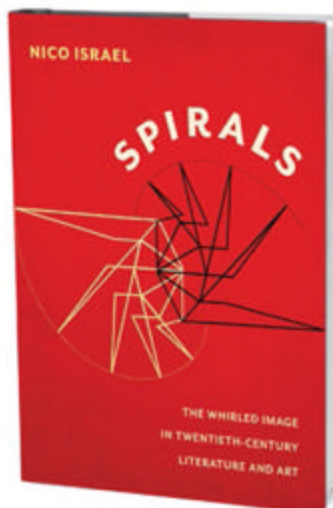
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Medieval Tastes

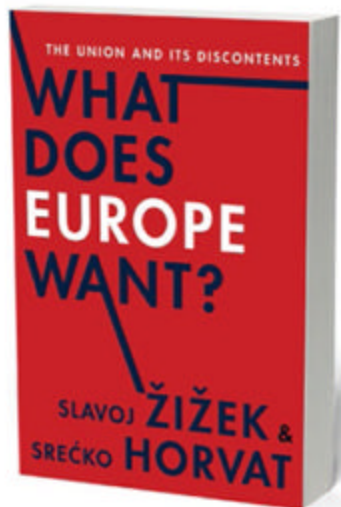
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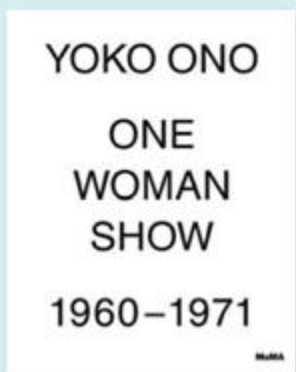


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different personal experience in recent weeks.

On Monday, February 16, I could say I felt well, in my usual state of health—at least such health and energy as a fairly active eighty-one-year-old can hope to enjoy—and this despite learning, a month earlier, that much of my liver was occupied by metastatic cancer. Various palliative treatments had been suggested—treatments that might reduce the load of metastases in my liver and permit a few extra months of life. The one I opted for, decided to try first, involved my surgeon, an interventional radiologist, threading a catheter up to the bifurcation of the hepatic artery, and then injecting a mass of tiny beads into the right hepatic artery, where they would be carried to the smallest arterioles, blocking these, cutting off the blood supply and oxygen needed by the metastases—in effect, starving and asphyxiating them to death. (My surgeon, who has a gift for vivid metaphor, compared this to killing rats in the basement; or, in a pleasanter image, mowing down the dandelions on the back lawn.) If such an embolization proved to be effective, and tolerated, it could be done on the other side of the liver (the dandelions on the front lawn) a month or so later.

The procedure, though relatively benign, would lead to the death of a huge mass of melanoma cells (almost 50 percent of my liver had been occupied by metastases). These, in dying, would give off a variety of unpleasant and pain-producing substances, and would then have to be removed, as all dead material must be removed from the body. This immense task of garbage disposal would be undertaken by cells of the immune system—macrophages—that are specialized to engulf alien or dead matter in the body. I might think of them, my surgeon suggested, as tiny spiders, millions or perhaps billions in number, scurrying inside me, engulfing the melanoma debris. This enormous cellular task would sap all my energy, and I would feel, in consequence, a tiredness beyond anything I had ever felt before, to say nothing of pain and other problems.

I am glad I was forewarned, for the following day (Tuesday, the seventeenth), soon after waking from the embolization—it was performed under general anesthesia—I was to be assailed by feelings of excruciating tiredness and paroxysms of sleep so abrupt they could poleaxe me in the middle of a sentence or a mouthful, or when visiting friends were talking or laughing loudly a yard away from me. Sometimes, too, delirium would seize me within seconds, even in the middle of handwriting. I felt extremely weak and inert—I would sometimes sit motionless until hoisted to my feet and walked by two helpers. While pain seemed tolerable at rest, an involuntary movement such as a sneeze or hiccup would produce an explosion, a sort of negative orgasm of pain, despite my being maintained, like all post-embolization patients, on a continuous intravenous infusion of narcotics. This massive infusion of narcotics halted all bowel activity for nearly a week, so that everything I ate—I had no appetite, but had to “take nourishment,” as the nursing staff put it—was retained inside me.

Another problem—not uncommon after the embolization of a large part of the liver—was a release of ADH, anti-

diuretic hormone, which caused an enormous accumulation of fluid in my body. My feet became so swollen they were almost unrecognizable as feet, and I developed a thick tire of edema around my trunk. This “hyperhydration” led to lowered levels of sodium in my blood, which probably contributed to my deliria. With all this, and a variety of other symptoms—temperature regulation was unstable, I would be hot one minute, cold the next—I felt awful. I had “a general feeling of disorder” raised to an almost infinite degree. If I had to feel like this from now on, I kept thinking, I would sooner be dead.

I stayed in the hospital for six days after embolization, and then returned home. Although I still felt worse than I had ever felt in my life, I did in fact feel a little better, minimally better, with each passing day (and everyone told me, as they tend to tell sick people, that I was looking “great”). I still had sudden, overwhelming paroxysms of sleep, but I forced myself to work, correcting the galleys of my autobiography (even though I might fall asleep in mid-sentence, my head dropping heavily onto the galleys, my hand still clutching a pen). These post-embolization days would have been very difficult to endure without this task (which was also a joy).

On day ten, I turned a corner—I felt awful, as usual, in the morning, but a completely different person in the afternoon. This was delightful, and wholly unexpected: there was no intimation, beforehand, that such a transformation was about to happen. I regained some appetite, my bowels started working again, and on February 28 and March 1, I had a huge and delicious diuresis, losing fifteen pounds over the course of two days. I suddenly found myself full of physical and creative energy and a euphoria almost akin to hypomania. I strode up and down the corridor in my apartment building while exuberant thoughts rushed through my mind.

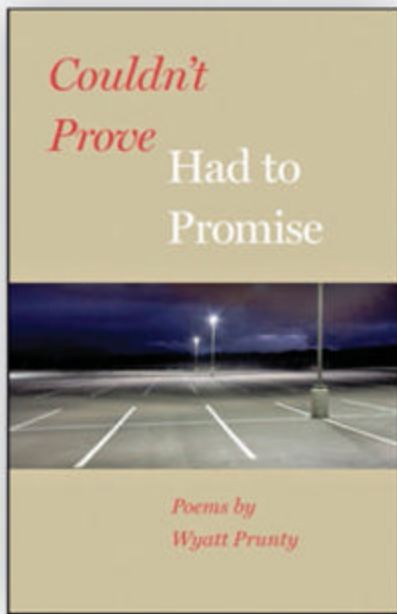
How much of this was a reestablishment of balance in the body; how much an autonomic rebound after a profound autonomic depression; how much other physiological factors; and how much the sheer joy of writing, I do not know. But my transformed state and feeling were, I suspect, very close to what Nietzsche experienced after a period of illness and expressed so lyrically in *The Gay Science*:

Gratitude pours forth continually, as if the unexpected had just happened—the gratitude of a convalescent—for *convalescence* was unexpected.... The rejoicing of strength that is returning, of a reawakened faith in a tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, of a sudden sense and anticipation of a future, of impending adventures, of seas that are open again.

Epilogue

The hepatic artery embolization destroyed 80 percent of the tumors in my liver. Now, three weeks later, I am having the remainder of the metastases embolized. With this, I hope I may feel *really* well for three or four months, in a way that, perhaps, with so many metastases growing inside me and draining my energy for a year or more, would scarcely have been possible before. □

CULTURE



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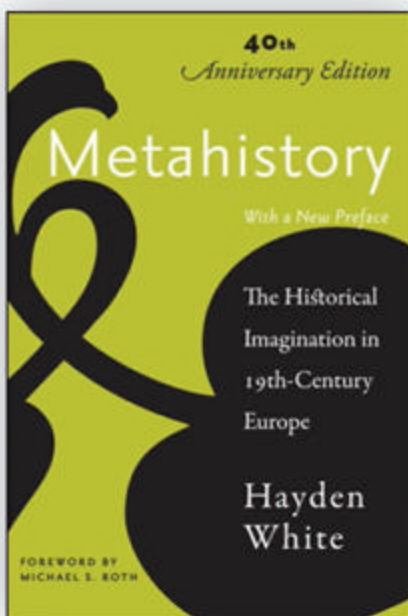
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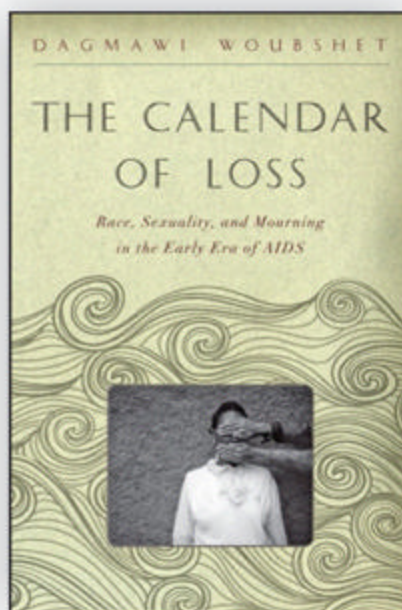


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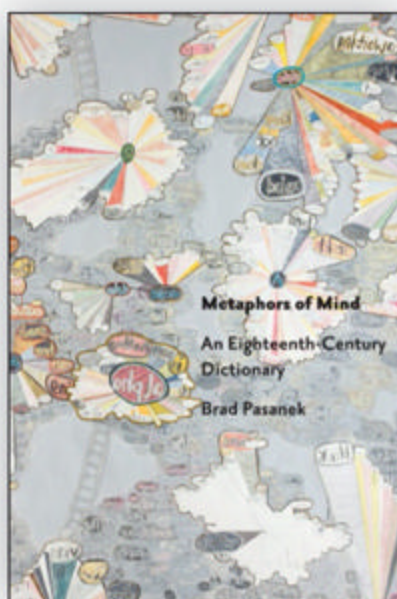
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CULTURE

Obama: Confessions of the Consultant

Joseph Lelyveld

Believer: My Forty Years in Politics
by David Axelrod.
Penguin, 509 pp., \$35.00

In a debate before the 2008 New Hampshire primary, the suddenly embattled Hillary Clinton—finally recognizing the threat posed to her candidacy by the upstart junior senator from Illinois—had something to say about the stirring promises of transformative post-partisan change he'd been making. She said she'd been fighting for change all her life in politics but cautioned: "We don't need to be raising the false hopes of our country about what can be delivered."

David Axelrod, the Chicago political consultant who orchestrated the themes of Barack Obama's campaign and coined its rapturous slogan "Yes We Can," immediately pounced on the dose of dour realism Clinton had just delivered. "I recognized the opportunity that Hillary had handed us," he writes in his readable memoir of his life in politics. "She was too much a part of the system in Washington ever to change it—and without changing the politics of Washington, real solutions to big problems would never come."

The consultant might have called his book *Confession* rather than *Believer*, for elsewhere, when he's not in campaign mode, he all but acknowledges that raising false hopes was his business, that it had a lot to do with the outcome he proudly—and, many would still say, justly—celebrates. A little more than a year into the first Obama term, with the economy still hemorrhaging jobs, Axelrod finds himself in the West Wing thinking back to those heady campaign days. "Obama had been elected promising something more ambitious, a wholesale change in our political culture—and by this measure he was failing," he reflects. "The country was no less divided."

Facing Obama's reelection campaign several years later he again uses the F word ("failure"). Polling data tell him that "the president's failure to tame Washington and build bipartisan bridges was the most often-stated disappointment among the movable independent voters who had decisively tilted his way in 2008." Finally, veering further in a confessional direction after he has stepped back from an active role, he concludes that Obama's initial victory, seeming to justify his claim of a mandate for change, had "touched off such a ferocious counterreaction that it wound up only exacerbating the problem." Not everyone, it turns out, was cheering when the president-elect proclaimed on that thrilling election night: "Change has come to America."

For Clinton in 2015—again the presumptive front-runner for the Democratic nomination, on what this time around remains an empty field—there may be a lesson here worth pondering. It's not to beware of raising false hopes. It's to remember that hope, once ignited, is likely to roll over gritty, hard-earned realism. Clearly she was right seven years ago about the prospects for transcending partisan warfare in Washington, but her challenger won the nomination and election, only to

be stunned at the outset of his administration when his landmark American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, aimed at heading off a second Great Depression, passed the House of Representatives without a single Republican vote in its favor.

That was a preview of the furious, scorched-earth legislative tactics Republicans have pursued these last six years in their campaign to undermine, even delegitimize a president who just happens to be the first non-white in the office. By their own count, the House has now voted to repeal the Af-



Presidential candidate Barack Obama and his chief campaign strategist, David Axelrod, at the Democratic National Convention, Denver, August 2008. Joe Biden is at left.

fordable Care Act sixty-seven times. (Democrats say it has only been fifty-six times.) Contrasted with their most recent affront—the reckless letter sent by forty-seven Republican senators to Iranian leaders calling into question President Obama's authority to conclude an agreement that might effectively freeze or stall Iran's nuclear bomb-building programs for ten or more years—those futile Obamacare votes were playacting.

The possibility of united, determined obstruction never intruded on the scenario of the "new, inclusive politics" sketched by the consultant and his "once-in-a-lifetime client" back when Obama was still a member of the Illinois legislature running for a Senate seat. In those days, he preached that we were all one people, not residents of red states and blue states; he still does, but the number of red states has risen while his approval ratings have drooped.

Of course, such crude political sums and subtractions amount to something less than a reliable verdict on the Obama presidency as a whole. David Axelrod, who was a White House insider for only the first two years, draws a persuasive picture of a president more deeply engaged in stepping up to the big issues as "the decider" (to revive a tag favored by his predecessor, the second Bush) than tracking the politics of his decisions. Few of those decisions, Axelrod finally argues, "would satisfy the politics of the moment. But at home and abroad, Obama was playing a longer game."

Trying to, at least. Early on the new president discovered there was more to the job than making careful, commonsense decisions. There's also the need to foresee the obstacles that may be put in a president's way, not always by political foes. Obama publicly declared that managers of the tottering insurance behemoth AIG should not be paid rich bonuses out of federal bailout funds, only to discover that his treasury secretary and chief economic adviser, Tim Geithner and Larry Summers, had already intervened on the other side. He could repudiate his advisers in the

midst of the crisis—an option he never considered—or pay the bonuses and the political cost that went with them. The bonuses were paid.

"You know, I love this job," Obama tells Axelrod in those dark days. "I love diving into problems. But dealing with some of the people you have to deal with and the whole cable thing wears you out."

A short time later, Axelrod, along with the then chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, counseled against a presidential decision to go flat out for a health care act that would include a mandate (penalizing those who don't sign up)—a provision Hillary Clinton had supported and Obama had opposed during the primaries, not on principle but to reap a political advantage. "What are we going to do?" he has Obama now saying in a private conversation. "Are we going to put our approval ratings on the shelf and admire them for eight years? Or are we going to spend down on them and try to get some important things done for the future?" Axelrod the memoirist writes of the adviser whose advice was being rejected: "Half of me wanted to stand up and cheer."

The other half of him, he later explains, knew that Obama could pay a steep political price. Contemplating the fast-spreading Tea Party protest, he finds evidence of "a truth we were loath to acknowledge publicly," which was that some of the anger was rooted in race, in "the idea of the black man with the Muslim name in the White House" arranging "just another giveaway to poor black people at their expense."

On the night the Affordable Care Act finally passes, the consultant sits alone in his White House office and cries. "Not little sniffles," so he says, "but big, heaving sobs." He writes that he was thinking of all the sacrifices he and his wife had made to assure treatment for their epileptic daughter. Obama, who'd promised bipartisanship, had shown himself ready to make distasteful deals, to bargain and implore, and had finally "jammed the law through on a straight party-line vote," risking his standing with "moderate, swing voters."

The consultant then wrings out his story for maximum effect. As he tells it, he walked across the hall and thanked the president on behalf of his family and others in similar predicaments. He recalls Obama responding, "That's why we do the work."

At other times the president's focus on "the work," on the command of detail it demands, gets in the way of leadership, his own ability to sell his programs. He could look slightly put upon, impatient to get back to his desk, in his rare White House press conferences. Some of that air of preoccupation carried over into his first debate in 2012 with a well-primed, bright-eyed, thoroughly rehearsed Mitt Romney. Axelrod had warned Obama the previous evening after his own rehearsal that he was speaking as if by rote, not connecting, missing his opportunities. His scribbled notes to himself on his candidate's performance come across on paper as groans. "Wonkfest," one said. "No humanity," said another, shorthand for a flunking grade for not connecting to real concerns of real people. A president gets unused to bad reviews from his inner circle. "No drama" Obama threw a small, uncharacteristic fit that night, tossing off trash talk as he stormed out through double doors. ("Motherfucker's never happy" is what Axelrod heard.) Surveys the night of the actual debate confirmed the consultant's forebodings.

Before the second debate, the top campaign advisers staged what one described as "an intervention" with the president. Axelrod spoke for the group. His pep talk belongs in texts on political campaigns in general, presidential campaigns in particular. "You're treating this like it's all on the level," he recalls himself saying. "It's not a trial or even a real debate. This is a performance. Romney understood that. He was delivering lines. You were answering questions. I know it's a galling process, but it is what it is."

It is what it is. Coming from a faithful, self-styled "believer," the words may register as cynical. But anyone can recognize the reality they describe. Obama was reelected to a second term by a decisive margin for various reasons. An important one is that he learned his lines, allowing his handlers to drill him over and over again until, to paraphrase one of them, they "locked in." He was no longer "disdainful of the artifice the process demanded of him." He suspended his disbelief so we could suspend ours.

The rough experience of gearing a proud and unbending president up for

Charles Ommamey/Getty Images



Margaret Gave Me a Rainbow: 2:30pm 21 November, 1971
 3M Color-in-Color mylar from inside the copier, heat transferred
 (with hand iron) to manilla paper hand stitched to cloth. Torn silver print
 of my ear machine-sewn to cloth. Tassels machine-sewn to a segment
 of the green Army sheet taken from my bed, as I had no cloth that color
 on hand, machine-sewn onto yellow cotton yardage.

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the 2012 debates leads the memoirist to reflect back on his one reservation about his friend and candidate at the outset of their long-shot quest for the White House. “My main concern,” he said then, “is that you’re not obsessive enough to run for president.” (Or words to that effect. Like many memoir writers, Axelrod has the preternatural knack of summoning up whole conversations word-for-word as if he taped them.) Putting the same thought another way, he recalls saying, “You may be too normal.” Agreeing, Obama said, so we’re told, that he didn’t “need to be president.” He then makes a singularly immodest, ultimately prescient pledge: “If I get in, I’m not getting in to lose. I’m going to do what’s necessary.” And he does, accepting inconvenient speaking gigs in likely swing states, piling up political debts, vanishing from his Chicago home and family for the better part of a year, patiently schooling himself to appear engrossed in the views of well-heeled, potential donors. It turns out that he’s obsessive enough, driven and self-disciplined, not too normal at all.

In truth, he was moving faster than his advisers. Before he had completed his second year in Washington as a senator, Axelrod recognized, “Barack was positioning himself to seize the moment if and when it came.” An early tip-off that he was serious on more than one level came in 2005, his first year in the Senate, in a discussion with his consultant and chief of staff on which way to vote on the nomination of John Roberts for chief justice. His initial inclination was to vote to confirm. “If I become president someday,” he said, not bothering to be coy, “I don’t want to see my own, qualified nominees for the Court shot down because of ideology.” Equally telling was his actual vote. He became one of twenty-two Democrats to vote no.

This brings us back to the question of what the eponymous “Believer” actually believed. Axelrod’s riffs on that question carry him back to the 1960s and the campaigns of John Kennedy, whom he viewed at the age of five on a campaign stop near Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan, and, more especially, Bobby Kennedy, who died when our author was thirteen. What he believes in, as he expresses it here, is not any particular program but a campaign and candidate who can stir the idealism of youth (“a healing figure” offering “a chance to end the wars, both abroad and in Washington, and lift the nation’s sights toward higher goals”).

He then sits down to write the freshman senator a memo, practically a mash note, that’s almost embarrassing in its jejune fervor, which we may assume to be genuine. He quotes it at length. Here’s a taste:

Voters are primed to turn the page and choose a candidate who offers an inspiring, inclusive, confident and HOPEFUL vision for America in the 21st Century. They want to believe again in themselves, their country and their future. They want to believe again in America’s exceptionalism, of which you are both a champion and a reflection. For all these reasons, you are uniquely suited for these times.

On both sides of the political divide, there are obviously operatives and vot-

ers receptive to or touched by this kind of ardor. They turn up at political rallies. But most voters don’t go to rallies. They watch them on TV with a measure of skepticism, if they watch them at all. They’re not “primed” to view their exercise of the franchise as a religious experience. Habit, economic circumstances, loyalties and biases of various kinds, anger as well as faith, not to mention attention spans that may be measured in seconds, all enter into their voting decisions. One can imagine Ronald Reagan receiving a memo in the same tone and words. That goes too for most of this year’s crop of Republican candidates. It’s harder to imagine what went through the mind of Barack Obama, a more subtle thinker, or so we’ve come



David Axelrod and Barack Obama backstage before a town hall meeting in Erie, Pennsylvania, during the presidential campaign, April 2008

to believe, when it landed in his inbox. Clearly it was not a turnoff.

We’ll have to wait for his memoir to find out. If it’s as evasive and defensive as most presidential memoirs, we never will. This president has shown himself to be a gifted writer so there’s reason to hope he’ll go deeper than his predecessors. If he’s serious about more than a big payday and preserving whatever it is the overused word “legacy” is supposed to represent, it’s not inconceivable that he’ll run the risk of candor and self-discovery, which is to say write like a truth-seeking writer and not a politician. The result could be the best presidential memoir we’ve had. (Yes, Ulysses S. Grant wrote a great one but he never got to his White House years.)

In his consultant’s rendering, the strongest suggestion of what Obama might say comes in the response he gave when his wife Michelle challenged him to tell what he could contribute that other capable candidates couldn’t:

The day I raise my hand to take that oath of office as president of the United States, the world will look at us differently, and millions of kids—black kids, Hispanic kids—will look at themselves differently.

Axelrod tells us that the soon-to-be candidate lifted his right hand as he said this.

The world was impressed, for a time, but not as impressed as the new president and his advisers had apparently allowed themselves to expect. Foreign

policy was not David Axelrod’s portfolio but he traveled abroad with Obama in 2008 when, as a candidate, he made a quick tour of the Middle East and delivered a speech to a large crowd in Berlin’s Tiergarten calling for a new spirit of collaboration among nations. Implicit in it was an underlying assumption that his election might be a turning point in world affairs. The only thing that was really new in the speech was Obama himself. Turns out that wasn’t enough:

In time, the challenge of overcoming ancient rivalries, of rising above parochial political concerns and advancing democracy in places with no history or institu-

The president’s reflections on this cycle of events should be another fascinating part of his memoir, whenever it appears. It will presumably be before the next high American officeholder gives a speech on democracy and new beginnings in Cairo.

In any future Obama memoir we may also hope to learn more about his thinking on various national security issues and personnel than has been forthcoming so far—his early decision against calling for an independent commission’s review of Bush administration officials who licensed torture in their ballyhooed war on terror; his thoughts about Senate Democrats who deserted him on the issue of closing the Guantánamo prison; the revolving door between the National Security Agency and private contracting firms; the long struggle between the Senate Intelligence Committee and the CIA over the committee’s report on torture and why no one at the agency was held accountable for hacking into the committee’s files; the use of drones on the frontier of Pakistan and beyond; how he came to rely on John Brennan, now director of central intelligence, for guidance on such issues... The list can be extended.

David Axelrod wasn’t consulted on such matters but he repeats a striking passage from a conversation President Obama had early on, back in 2009, that may foreshadow the approach he’ll take in a memoir. The meeting was with a group of civil liberties lawyers who’d come to the White House to discuss the issue of preventive detention. “We have different roles,” he said.

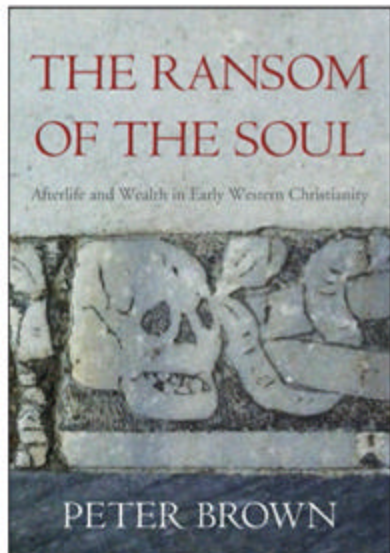
You represent clients and you are doing exactly what you should. I am the president of the United States, with the responsibility to protect the American people. Do we just release them and take the chance they blow you up? There’s only so much a democracy can bear.

The obvious subtext is an abiding concern about the pressures that might erupt in the aftermath of another big attack to again loosen restraints on all the practitioners of counterterrorism, on surveillance, preventive detention, even torture.

Axelrod the Believer viewed the 2008 campaign as “the triumph of politics as it should be.” Ever HOPEFUL, he’s now at the University of Chicago, urging young people to “grab the wheel of history and steer us to a better place.”

That’s how he ends his book, which may inspire some young people as in love with politics and as idealistic as he tells us he was. It seems churlish to point out that it’s not only in the Middle East that “ancient rivalries” and “stubborn realities” intrude; to wonder, for instance, how much youthful idealism it will now take to do something about the *Citizens United* decision, the Koch brothers, all the other billionaires who feel entitled to thrust their weighty thumbs on the political scales, the K Street lobbying legions flocking to congressional fundraisers, the various manifestations of money politics that have festered—no fault of Obama’s—since “politics as it should be” brought “change” to Washington. □

Charles Ommann/Getty Images



The Ransom of the Soul

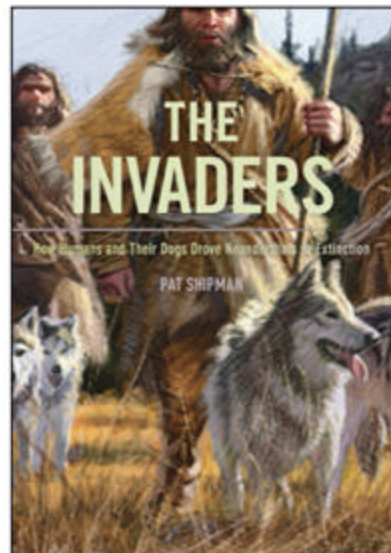
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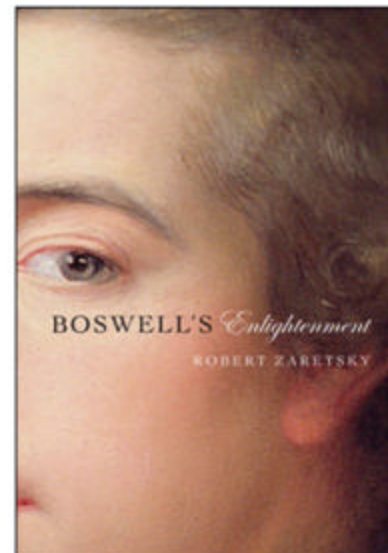
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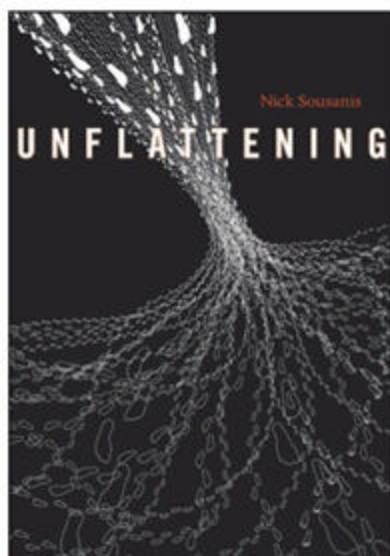
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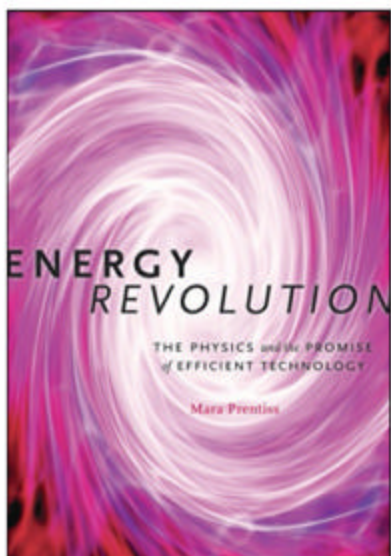
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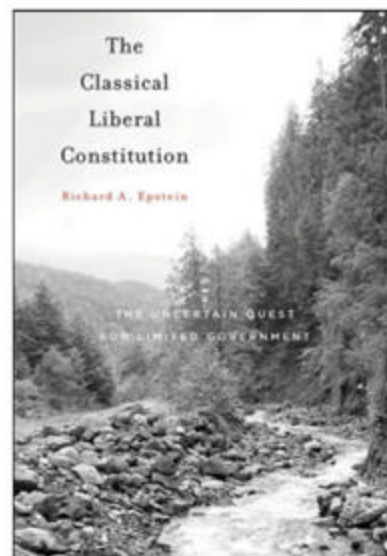
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The Magic of Donatello

Andrew Butterfield

Sculpture in the Age of Donatello: Renaissance Masterpieces from Florence Cathedral

an exhibition at the Museum of Biblical Art, New York City, February 20–June 14, 2015. Catalog of the exhibition edited by Timothy Verdon and Daniel M. Zolli. Museum of Biblical Art/Giles, 200 pp., \$49.95

The Museum of Biblical Art, lodged in a relatively small space on Broadway near Lincoln Center, is now showing nine sculptures by Donatello, one of the greatest of all Renaissance artists. Never before have so many of his best works been shown together in the United States.

Among the works on view is Donatello's large sculpture of the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. "Speak, damn you, speak!" Donatello, we are told, repeatedly shouted at the statue while carving it. The dream of a statue that can speak or breathe or move is a fantasy shared by many cultures throughout time, and the story may be apocryphal. Still, it points to the fundamental appeal of Donatello's sculptures: by some strange magic they seem to capture the phantom of life. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Habakkuk*, which Vasari praised as "finer than anything else he ever made." Even today it is often said to be the most important marble statue of the fifteenth century.

This sublimely harrowing work is at the heart of the exhibition "Sculpture in the Age of Donatello." All twenty-three items in it were made for the cathedral of Florence in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and are on loan from its museum, the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, which is currently closed for renovation. None of the sculptures has been shown in the US before. Along with works by Donatello, the exhibition features sculptures by his contemporaries Nanni di Banco, Luca della Robbia, Giovanni d'Ambrogio, and others, as well as architectural models by Filippo Brunelleschi.

The show reminds us why Donatello is so often ranked among the greatest sculptors. Born in Florence around 1386, the son of a wool carder, he worked in his teens assisting Lorenzo Ghiberti on the bronze doors of the Baptistery, but very soon after emerged as one of the preeminent artists of the Renaissance. His most admired sculptures include the fiery *Saint George* carved for the church of Orsanmichele around 1416, the sleek bronze *David* made for the Medici, probably in the late 1430s, and the proud equestrian statue of the Venetian condottiere Erasmo da Narni, known as Gattamelata, erected in Padua between 1447 and 1453. Sources tell us little about Donatello's personality, although one writer describes him as being "rough and very straightforward." In his art, too, he favored forcefulness of expression and cared little for tradition and convention.

The objects in New York are displayed in just one medium-sized room. Since some of the sculptures are larger than life and most were intended for



'Prophet' (possibly Habakkuk), known as the 'Zuccone'; marble sculpture by Donatello, 1427–1436

placement on the exterior of the cathedral and its bell tower, this setting could have proved very unsympathetic. Fortunately, the works are beautifully lighted, and the bases are high enough to suggest their original exalted position yet low enough to allow the viewer to stand in close proximity to them. Moreover, several of the statues have recently been freed from decades of soot and grime by cleaning; for the first time in living memory they are close to their original color and luster. They are shown to better effect in New York than ever before.

A system of translucent white curtains divides the room into bays for the different sections of the show, allowing the visitor to concentrate on individual items, but also to take in the entire exhibition at a glance. The visual experience is compressed yet illuminating. Standing in one spot, simply by turning your head, you can see the evolution of art in Florence during the first decades of the Renaissance.

Continuing efforts to build and decorate the Florentine Duomo made it the most important site for the development of sculpture and architecture in

Europe in the early fifteenth century. This flourishing is all the more remarkable when we consider how sudden it was. In Florence both arts had lain dormant for much of the previous century; the few major projects there in building and sculpting had been commissioned mostly from foreign artists who came to the city specifically for the task, and often left even before the job was done. For instance, the new cathedral of Florence was begun in 1296 by Arnolfo di Cambio, a Sienese artist who had trained in Pisa, and the first bronze doors for the Baptistery, made around 1330, were designed by a sculptor from Pisa and cast by a founder from Venice. Effectively, there was no local tradition in making sculpture or architecture.

When work on the cathedral entered a new phase of high activity at the end of the fourteenth century, non-Florentines still were predominant in its creation—one leading sculptor for the Duomo was from Germany. The last instance of this tendency was the famous competition held in 1401 to make a new set of bronze doors for the Baptistery; most of the contestants were from Siena and other Tuscan towns. Yet this competition was won by the young Florentine gold-

smith Lorenzo Ghiberti, and another young Florentine goldsmith, Filippo Brunelleschi—the future architect—came in second. A new era in the history of art had begun.

Like all revolutions, the transformation of the arts in early-fifteenth-century Florence can never be fully explained; at best we can only identify some contributing causes. Stimulated in part by the city's soaring prosperity and growing hegemony, around 1400 the wealthy merchants who ran Florence began to pour unprecedented amounts of cash into new buildings, paintings, and sculptures. They were proud of the architectural splendor of Florence and saw it as a sign of the city's manifest destiny. This attitude was given voice by Leonardo Bruni, who wrote around 1403–1404 in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence*:

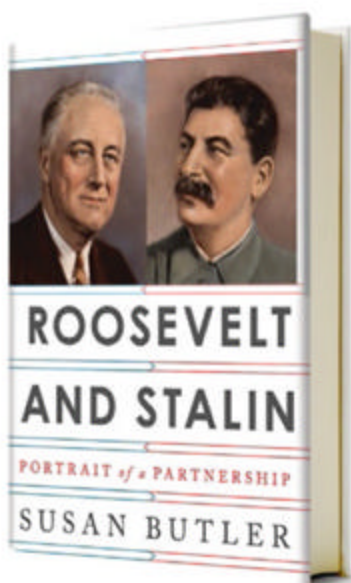
As soon as [visitors] have seen... the grandeur of its buildings, its splendor and magnificence, the lofty towers, the marble churches, the domes of the basilicas... they are no longer amazed by the greatness and most important exploits accomplished by Florence. Rather, everyone immediately comes to believe that Florence is indeed worthy of attaining dominion and rule over the entire world.

As the Florentine merchant and philosopher Matteo Palmieri stated some years later, it was the duty of "great men" to spend "on things that are honorable and full of glory, not private, but public things, such as buildings and the decoration of churches."

No one ranked higher in Florentine society than the members of the international wool merchants' guild, the Arte della Lana, who patronized the Duomo. Starting in the 1390s, they sought to put up more statues, on a larger scale and more quickly, than ever before in Florentine history. The scope of effort was colossal. It occurred, however, at a moment when many cities, including Milan and Venice, were also erecting enormous cathedrals and palaces, and as a result experienced sculptors and masons were in demand all over Italy. The overseers of the Duomo had no choice but to rely more than before on a group of untested locals, many of whom had been initially trained as goldsmiths, not as stone carvers.

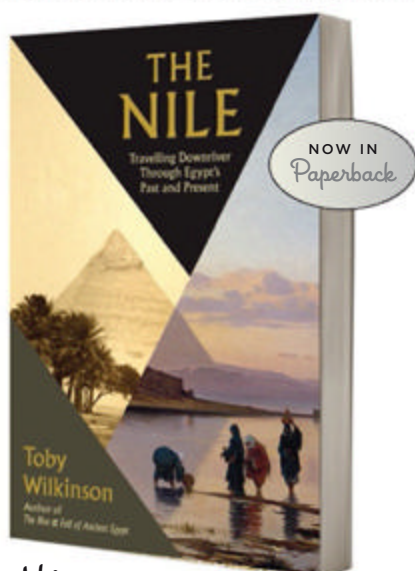
It is rarely remarked how very young these artists were. At the time of the competition for the Baptistery doors Ghiberti was only about twenty-one, and Brunelleschi twenty-four. Donatello was only about twenty when he began his earliest independent commission, a prophet for the cathedral, which is on view in the exhibition. Nanni di Banco, Donatello's main rival in these years in marble carving, was also in his early or mid-twenties when he made the pendant to this figure. Their youthful freedom from the weight of tradition helped these artists to reimagine the possibilities and techniques of sculpture, and the urgent demand for new work meant they were forced into continual collaboration and competition—a perfect setting for innovation. The sculpture workshop of

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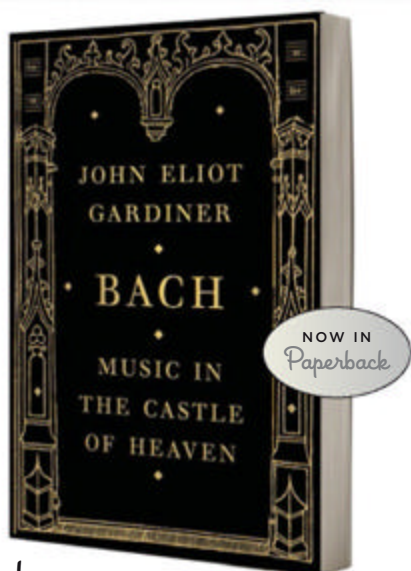
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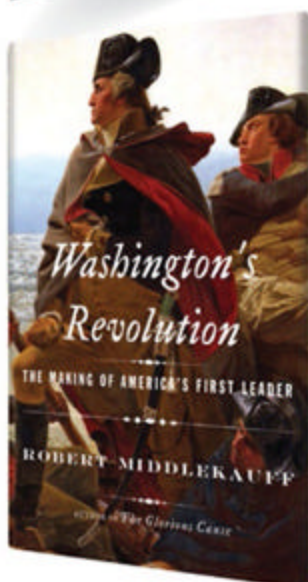
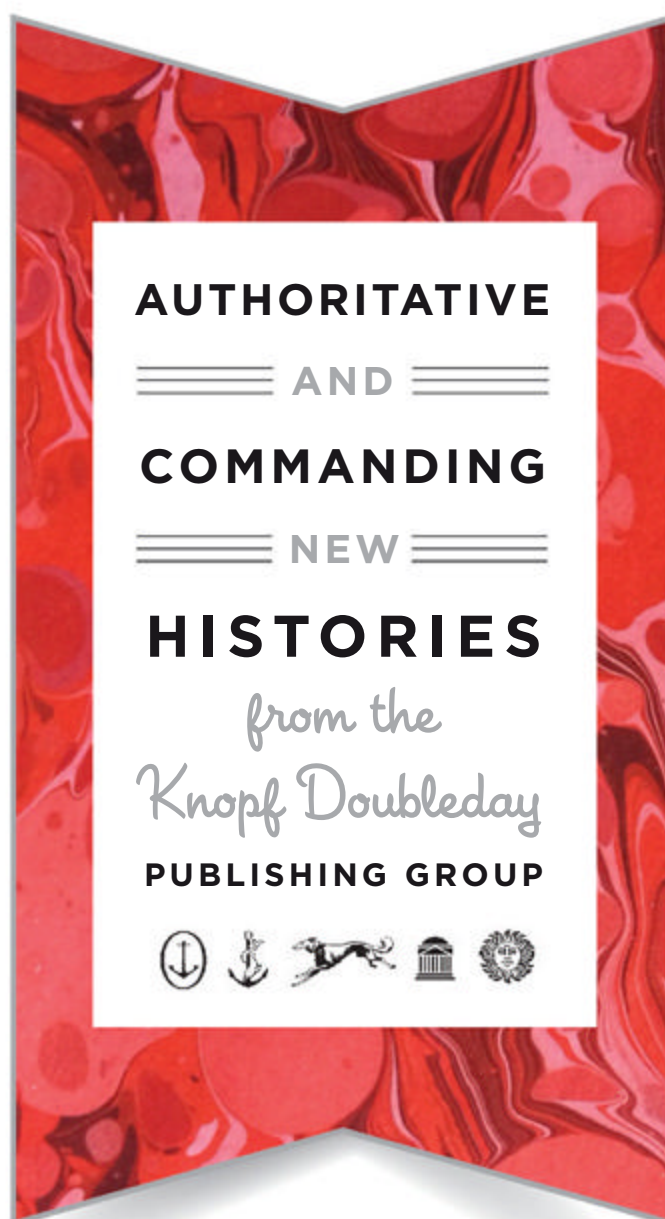
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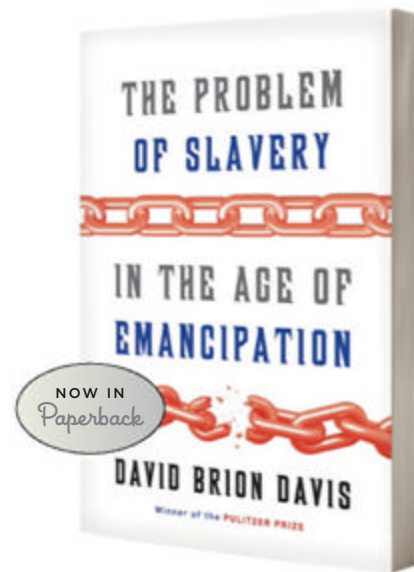
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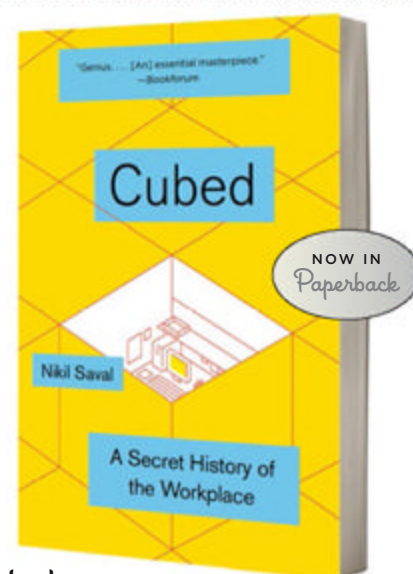


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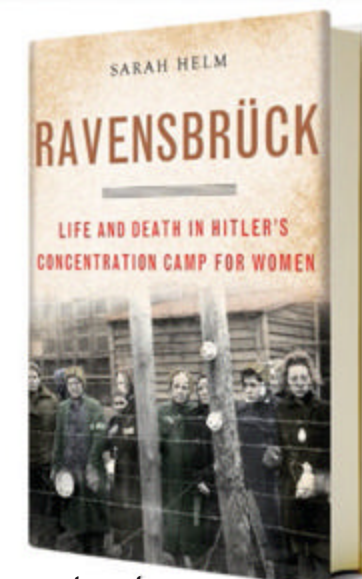


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the cathedral became a laboratory of constant experimentation and advance.

The exhibition opens with an Annunciation group of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, made at the end of the fourteenth century, and commonly attributed to the sculptor Giovanni d'Ambrogio. It exemplifies both the sophistication and the limitations of Italian sculpture of this time. The faces are exquisitely carved and the robes wrap around the figures with consummate grace, yet the bodies are nearly lost beneath the fabric and the limbs are pressed so close to the trunk of the statue that they look stunted and inert.

A basic problem for many sculptors before the fifteenth century was technical, as we can see in these statues. Uncertain of the physical capacities of stone, and unwilling to risk spoiling a costly block of marble through unnecessary experimentation, artists typically carved their statues as shallowly as possible, with minimal undercutting of the limbs and drapery. As a result, sculptures of this time often appear blocky and constrained.

We are in a very different world when we stand before the prophets attributed to Donatello and Nanni di Banco, carved about ten years later, for the Porta della Mandorla, a major entrance on the north side of the cathedral. Gone is the refinement and restraint of earlier works. Instead the emphasis is entirely on movement and emotion. Donatello's *Profetino* (small prophet) is so desperate to communicate that he lurches toward us, almost stepping off his base. He juts his neck forward and raises his head, seemingly yearning for the light above, yet his eyes are directed downward and his lips are parted. He is about to speak, and the hand raised to the heart suggests that his message will be moving and grave.

The new emphasis on motion and expression was accompanied by a change in technique. Ghiberti and Donatello were possibly the first artists since classical antiquity regularly to make large sculptures on the basis of three-dimensional preparatory models in wax or clay rather than drawings. It was likely Ghiberti who devised this innovation, based on his experience working with gold, for which model-making was common, although in much smaller dimensions.

This development had many advantages. Fundamentally, it allowed artists to experiment in the design of statuary with far greater liberty. Rather than conceiving sculptures in relation to the rectilinear planes of the quarried block, artists could now, from the start, imagine their statues as figures that stood and moved freely. This innovation was noted by Leon Battista Alberti in his *Treatise on Statuary*, perhaps written in the 1430s, where he says that models permit the sculptor to depict greater movement of the limbs and more complex surfaces.

We can see exactly what Alberti means when we look at the Abraham and Isaac made by Donatello and a young assistant, Nanni di Bartolo, in 1421 for a niche on the cathedral's bell tower, the Campanile. The first monumental multifigure sculpture of the Renaissance—it is over six feet tall—it depicts the moment when Abraham, hearing the angel of the Lord, relents in

his sacrifice of his son. With one hand Abraham still grasps Isaac's hair at the back of his head, but with the other he turns the blade away from Isaac's neck, and his grip on the knife has begun to relax. The sculpture's strong illusion of movement was aided by drilling clear through the block of marble at several points so that Abraham's massive arms can appear to swing free of his torso, and the right legs of Abraham and Isaac can be posed in front of their bodies. Since the end of classical antiquity nearly a thousand years before, no Italian sculptor had tried anything so bold in the carving of marble sculpture.



Donatello: Abraham and Isaac, 1421

One of Donatello's favorite subjects was the depiction of a holy person who had suffered an acutely painful religious experience and had thereby won divine wisdom beyond the limits of human understanding. Examples of this from his late works include his painted wood Mary Magdalene of about 1455 (also in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, but alas not in the show), in which she is represented as a toothless crone praying in the desert, or his *Resurrection* on the pulpit of San Lorenzo (1460–1466), where a haggard Christ in a filthy winding sheet looks like he still stinks from the grave. Donatello's portrayal of sacred subjects was completely at odds with the usual approach of the time: most artists depicted saints as beyond the reach of suffering, even when they were shown undergoing martyrdom.

Among Donatello's first attempts to represent a holy person in this way was the marble of *Habbakuk*, which he carved for the Campanile likely between 1427 and 1436. It represents the prophet whose short book in the Old Testament concerns the rise and advance of the Chaldeans against the Jews in the seventh century BC. The sculpture is commonly called *Lo Zuccone* ("the pumpkin") because of his large bald pate. Created three decades after the *Profetino*, it was the last marble statue Donatello ever made; thereafter he worked chiefly in bronze.

The first word of the book of Hab-

vine vision: "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself." Donatello's statue embodies the sense of spiritual and physical terror in the biblical account.

There is a tendency in the study of Donatello to praise his classicism and naturalism, but looking at *Habbakuk* one must acknowledge how inadequate and misleading such terms are in any account of his art. The massive drapery of the figure, for example, is only loosely related to that of ancient sculpture, and the head with its mesmerizing eyes is far distant from the restraint of a Republican or Imperial bust. Even philosopher portraits from the so-called "age of anxiety" in the third and fourth centuries AD look placid and serene by comparison. Donatello, no doubt, studied ancient sculpture with passion, but he felt wholly unbound by its conventions; he was only interested in how it could help him achieve greater vitality and expressiveness.

According to a tradition repeated in Vasari, *Habbakuk*'s features were modeled on those of a Florentine citizen, and partly on this basis some art historians have credited the statue's power to its element of realism. But as with so many of Donatello's works, the credibility of this sculpture—its eerie vividness and palpable sense of presence—has as much to do with the distortion of actuality as with its imitation. As we can see in *Habbakuk*, Donatello was always significantly exaggerating the size of the most expressive features, especially the eyes, mouth, and hands. Another example of this in the show is in the *Saint John the Evangelist* made for the façade of the cathedral between 1408 and 1415; Donatello gave this statue massive hands and ferocious eyes as well. Furthermore, to overcome the lifelessness of marble or bronze, he made the outlines and surfaces of his sculptures undulate in irregular, uneven, and asymmetrical shapes so that the figure would look as if it were caught in a moment of change, like a living thing.

Historians like to celebrate Donatello for groundbreaking achievements such as making the first bronze nude statue since antiquity in his *David* for the Medici, or devising a way to apply the rules of single-point perspective to sculpture in his relief of Saint George and the Dragon. These were accomplishments of great significance for the development of art, but still they were secondary to his principal artistic ambition: to show the power and the drama of the human response to contact with the divine. Throughout his career, he depicted holy persons, rapt in religious ecstasy and transfigured by revelation, not only because his commissions required him to, but because experience of the sacred was what he yearned for personally. In art he was a naturalist but one whose idea of nature included the unseen and the unearthly as well as the visible and the mundane.

In the Bible Habbakuk warned against those who would seek to make idols, "Woe unto to him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise." Yet this seems to be exactly the kind of command Donatello gave his *Habbakuk*. Like a Renaissance magus, he believed the world was full of spirits, and he wanted his sculptures to palpitate with life. □

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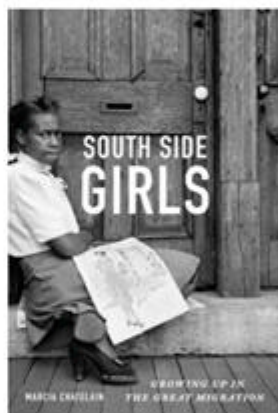
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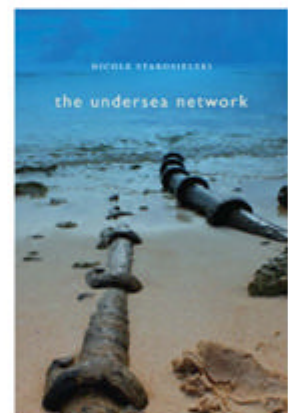
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The Mad Boy, Lord Berners, My Grandmother and Me: An Aristocratic Family, a High-Society Scandal and an Extraordinary Legacy
by Sofka Zinovieff.
Harper, 436 pp., \$35.00

It was an oddity of growing up in the small Berkshire town of Faringdon in the 1950s that Lord Berners's name was often mentioned. He was, in a way, a part of the landscape. A tall slender tower on a hill at the edge of the town was the goal of all our childhood walks, its red-brick walls rising scarily blank to a high-up viewing chamber and Gothic crown that showed above the surrounding pines. This was Lord Berners's Folly, said to be the last great folly built in England, and stridently opposed by the town when it was first planned in 1934. Before long of course it was something to be proud of, and when Berners depicted it in his painting for a famous Shell poster it became an emblem of the town, its Eiffel Tower. It was opened with fireworks on Guy Fawkes Night 1935 and the guests were invited to "bring effigies of their enemies for the bonfire. No guest may bring more than six effigies." It bore a characteristic notice: "MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC COMMITTING SUICIDE FROM THIS TOWER DO SO AT THEIR OWN RISK."

Berners, a distinguished composer, novelist, and memoirist as well as a prolific painter, was best known to us, as he had been for decades to the illustrated papers, as an eccentric. Around him anecdote, not discouraged by himself, proliferated and mutated. Extremely rich, he had made Faringdon House, his elegant Georgian mansion concealed beyond the parish church, a place of luxurious hospitality to artistic and society friends throughout the 1930s and beyond. Twenty years earlier a clued-in porter might have noted the arrival at our little train station of Salvador Dalí, Gertrude Stein, or Elsa Schiaparelli.

After Berners's death in 1950 his much younger partner and heir, Robert Heber-Percy, maintained his traditions. He continued to dye the Faringdon pigeons all the colors of the rainbow, and made further surreal interventions in our placid rural scene. He installed the salvaged statue of "Africa" that looked down on the road into town on the north side—a swathed figure spoken of and described in guidebooks as a woman, but on close inspection of the chest quite clearly a man. It had just the Berners note of deadpan provocation, a sexual conundrum hidden in plain sight. Sofka Zinovieff records the rumor that the Folly itself was a birthday present from Berners to Heber-Percy, an outrageous phallic compliment disguised as an architectural caprice.

Their relationship was an attraction of opposites, the older man shy, stout, and bald, a depressive who sought refuge in frivolity and the creation of wittily sophisticated music; the younger, known for much of his life as "the Mad Boy," lean, handsome, barely educated, recklessly physical, and sexually magnetic. Mainly Heber-Percy magnetized



Lord Berners, Robert Heber-Percy with his daughter Victoria, and Jennifer Fry in the drawing room at Faringdon, Oxfordshire, September 1943; photograph by Cecil Beaton

men, but he had flings with women, one of which produced a daughter. This is really the origin of Zinovieff's book, since that daughter was her mother. The early part of *The Mad Boy, Lord Berners, My Grandmother and Me* gives an admirable account of Berners's colorful but hardworking career, and of the life he and Heber-Percy made together at Faringdon; it's in effect a double biography, in which a story told before only from Berners's perspective is seen from a new angle. Then, very fascinatingly, Zinovieff traces the complex aftermath of their story through subsequent generations.

The result is a study in unconventional relationships, enshrined in the setup at Faringdon House, in surprising marriages and rapid divorces, in the pursuit of pleasure and its darker undertow. A note of heartlessness is essential to the fun as well as the pain of this largely upper-class world. Faringdon itself is at the center of the book; it was Heber-Percy's final but inspired piece of mischief to leave the house and its estate not to an expectant nephew, not to his daughter (who got nothing at all), but to his granddaughter Sofka, and the later chapters of her superbly illustrated book are a subtle reckoning with what such an inheritance might mean and entail to an independent-minded writer and anthropologist, responsive to the beauty and legends of the house, but dismayed by the demands and snobberies of the class system that had long sustained and defined it.

After his mother died in 1931, Berners felt free to start writing a memoir of his childhood in which he could speak frankly, if not always accurately, about

her, and about the miseries and occasional joys of his own upbringing. *First Childhood* (1934) and *A Distant Prospect* (1945), about his time at Eton, trace the emergence of a sensitive aesthete from a background of philistine Shropshire gentry; the books are also a quite bold attempt to explain himself as both a depressive and a homosexual. The depression was there from early on—"Black care can sit behind us even on our rocking-horses." Feelings of isolation and neglect fed the larger blackness, fits of accidie that long outlived their cause; the constantly concocted frivolity of his later life was as much a way of keeping his depression at bay as were the strictly maintained routines of writing, painting, and composing. When Faringdon House had to be closed down at the start of World War II, this sustaining ambience was destroyed and Berners, lodging fifteen miles away in Oxford, had a nervous breakdown and underwent Freudian analysis.

His school life was dominated by hatred for sadistic masters, aesthetic rapture caused by music and the discovery of Wagner, and hopeless adoration for certain boys—the memoirs give off an unusually strong sense, for a man in his fifties, of unforgiven cruelties and unforgotten humiliations. Berners describes his obsession with a beautiful boy called Longworth, a romance that seems about to reach an improbable fruition when Longworth invites Berners to join him for a cigarette on the roof and lies beside him in the moonlight: "Never before in my life had I seen such disturbing beauty in a human face." With perhaps a "telepathic inkling" of his adorer's feelings, Longworth throws his arm around him and draws him close. "Then a dreadful thing occurred. Almost before I knew

what was happening I was violently sick."

Berners always describes himself as someone without a chance as a lover, a person whose own body was at odds with his desires; but these accounts were written after he had settled down with Heber-Percy, and have perhaps a further private irony. His sexual life remains a possibly appropriate blank. Zinovieff says the two men were not viewed as lovers by the staff; and Mark Amory, in his 1998 biography of Berners, seems to credit the story of an unsuccessful trial weekend, after which Berners said, "Don't go. You make me laugh. I don't mind about the other."

This would certainly square with Berners's equanimity about his partner's subsequent marriage, and later the installation of a boyfriend of his own at Faringdon House. Berners was loyal and generous, but surely not good at intimacy. The "Valse sentimentale" he composed for four hands suggests the most clumsy mismatch of the dancing couple. To some people indeed he seemed, in his charming way, not quite human—Siegfried Sassoon found him "consistently inhuman and unfailingly agreeable." To Clarissa Churchill, a new young friend made during World War II, "his jokes were a defence against intimacy." It fits with the pattern that Zinovieff, at early meetings with her grandfather Heber-Percy, found that "his character discouraged intimacy." The admission of true feeling was not only bad form, it was a threat.

What strikes one more now, in the memoirs and in the short surreal novels Berners wrote after being psychoanalyzed, is the amused and unflustered prominence he gives to gay characters, perhaps more than any contemporary writer. Homosexuality, he writes, "is a subject that has been handled by the most highly esteemed authors of all times, from Moses to Proust, and sometimes, I may say, not without a certain degree of hypocrisy." Berners himself was not a hypocrite; his high bohemian circle was rich in gay men and in others, like Heber-Percy, whose sexuality was more omnivorous. He was certainly wary of public queenery, refusing to appear at breakfast at an Amalfi hotel with the "Mad Boy"—Heber-Percy—in "a scarlet shirt, a blue jumper, green trousers and a yellow belt."

Berners's style was more the poker-faced hint, the wink through the monocle. In his perceptive short memoir of the novelist Ronald Firbank he confesses that at first he found his friend's flamboyance "decidedly embarrassing." In fact in both men pathological shyness existed in a complex relation with their need to draw attention to themselves, though it is not always easy to say where the involuntary merges with calculated performance. To Berners, Firbank was "strange, orchidaceous, incoherent, fantastic," an idiosyncratic mix of the helpless and the willed.

It's a shame that Berners never wrote an account of his life as a composer. The fascination of his music from the start was its un-English orientation, its

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Bureau Spectacular, by Jimenez Lai, assisted by Senaid Selcin and Frank Gossage. *Cartoonish Metropolis* (detail), 2011. © Bureau Spectacular.
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detachment from both the melancholy late-imperial splendor of Edward Elgar and the burgeoning pastoral tradition of Vaughan Williams. In the 1930s his distinctive taste would align him with composers a generation younger, such as Constant Lambert and William Walton. He writes at a refreshingly Frenchified angle to his native scene, typical of his desire to startle, to amuse, and to prick pomposity. In 1916 he sought guidance from Stravinsky, who had a high opinion of his talents within their prescribed range. One of his most surprising pieces is among his earliest, composed that year, *Three Little Funeral Marches*—one for a statesman (ponderous), one for a canary (sweetly pathetic), and one for a rich aunt (a gleeful allegro). Some people found them an unseemly response to death in the midst of the war, but their ignoring of the war was no doubt part of their point.

Berners became known as the “English Satie,” which isn’t quite right but suggests his disconcerting wit and economy. The mainspring of his music is parody—after his *Fantaisie Espagnole* was performed (in the same program as the first British concert performance of *The Rite of Spring*) Constant Lambert remarked that it was now “impossible to hear most Spanish music without a certain satiric feeling breaking through.” Notable commissions followed: *The Triumph of Neptune*, choreographed by George Balanchine for Sergei Diaghilev in 1926; and *A Wedding Bouquet*, a ballet with a chorus singing text by Gertrude Stein, in 1937. The *Fantaisie Espagnole* seemed set to become standard repertory in the 1920s, but like these other beautifully crafted pieces it

is now hardly played at all; perhaps the “satiric feeling” that animates them has also proved their limitation.

Berners inherited his title (he became the fourteenth Baron Berners) from a childless maternal uncle in 1918. His discreet early claim that “I inherit only the title, with a lot of taxes to be paid” proved incorrect; he was now seriously rich and free to create for himself the optimal conditions for both pleasure and work. He bought and beautified houses in both Rome (where he’d worked as an honorary attaché to the British embassy) and London’s Belgravia. Robert Heber-Percy, on the other hand, knew from the start that he would inherit almost nothing. Like Berners he came from an old Shropshire family, but he was a fourth son, with minimal prospects, and with almost no ability to concentrate.

The paradoxes of Heber-Percy’s childhood were formative: the uninhibited outdoor life of a big estate, which he would stick to till the end, and the regimented indoor life, whose piety and abstinence he emphatically rejected, while valuing into his old age the formal regularity of a well-run household. As the youngest child he was left behind by his elder brothers and furtively spoiled by his mother; he became a “daring show-off” to prove himself and attract attention otherwise directed elsewhere.

There was no chance of his getting into Eton or Harrow, but he found a place at the newly founded Stowe school, a vast country house of about the same size as the one he lived in at

home, where he carried on with much the same sense of daredevil entitlement. His headmaster wrote about him: “He is a problem. Some people can’t succeed, but *he can’t try*.” Sending him on to a crammer at the age of sixteen, he observed that “fatigue appears to make his mind go perfectly blank at intervals. You will find his work startlingly bad, but I shall be greatly surprised if you do not like the boy himself.”

Similar objections were made, in a less friendly voice, by his superiors in the King’s Dragoon Guards, which he joined at the age of nineteen. There are very funny reports under different headings: “Energy: . . . *lazy*”; “Tact: . . . *tactless*”; “Leadership: . . . *indifferent*”; “Tactical knowledge: . . . *scanty*.” Laziness and indifference led swiftly to his expulsion; and after that he was let loose on what Zinovieff calls “the wild life of the city.” Within a year he would meet Gerald Berners at a house party, and then the course of the rest of his life was set. He was twenty and Berners was forty-eight. If he felt at home at Faringdon, it was in part, as Zinovieff suggests, because he behaved there like “a favoured first son on a country estate, but with the indulgence of an older man who was in love with him.” It was a magical adaptation of the preordained perspectives of family life and a happy deliverance from any conventional career.

Everyone in both their worlds was surprised. It “was the first time I had met civilised people,” Heber-Percy later recalled. But the civilization of Faringdon, with its celebrated warmth (“Faringdonheit” as one guest called it), its rich food (the signature Soufflé de Berners was made with brandy, eggs, cream, and crystallized fruit), and its glamorous, sexually unorthodox guests, was a thing apart. What Heber-Percy and Alice B. Toklas talked about over breakfast we will never know, but they probably got on fine, and there were certain parallels in their roles; “we did not share a single interest,” he said of Berners after his death, a special kind of tribute to a friendship. Still, the Faringdon of those years was a collaboration. They thought up ideas like dyeing the pigeons together but it was Heber-Percy who executed them. He became estate manager and during the war was officially Lord Berners’s “agent.”

There’s an eloquent photograph by Cecil Beaton that captures what happened next. Posing in the study that Berners used during the war as a bedroom, it places three unsmiling heads on a diagonal: at the top, Heber-Percy, leaning lightly against the bed and looking down at Berners, at the center of the picture, seated at a desk and reading a book in apparent unconcern, while sitting on the floor, her face half in shadow, is Jennifer Fry, now the Mad Boy’s wife. She alone looks out at us, an uncertain intruder in the world of the two men. Both the young people got on with Berners, but not with each other. After marrying her and bringing her to Faringdon, Heber-Percy’s cruel streak had emerged; he had repudiated her and locked her out of his bedroom. The marriage was effectively over.

As a writer Zinovieff has been doubly fortunate in her grandmothers. In *Red Princess* (2007) she explored the extraordinary adventures, sexual, political, and intellectual, of her father’s

mother, Sofka Dolgorouky, a Russian aristocrat who fled the 1917 revolution, was interned by the Nazis, worked for the French Resistance, moved to England, yet was a card-carrying Communist to the end of her days. The most poignant parts of *The Mad Boy* are her investigation of the life of her English grandmother, another highly sexed and intelligent woman, caught up not in revolution but in the brittle dysfunction of British upper-class life.

The only child of a severe, wealthy, and secretly gay father and a beautiful but passive and neurasthenic mother, Jennifer grew up in the care of nannies (she’d had nine by the age of five) in a large and lonely-looking country house in Wiltshire called Oare. Her salvation was the last nanny, known as Pixie, with whom she formed the most enduring relationship of her life. (Such bonds with particular servants are a feature of this story.) She was attractive, adventurous, what was known as “a popular girl”; but was drawn recurrently to men who would treat her badly. After Heber-Percy she married the poet, editor, and cricketer Alan Ross, who seems to have been at once and continually unfaithful to her, though she maintained him financially for many years.

When Berners died, Evelyn Waugh wrote, “The Mad Boy has installed a Mad Boy of his own. Has there ever been a property in history that has devolved from catamite to catamite for any length of time?” In fact Hugh Cruddas, who had become a fixture at Faringdon toward the end of the war, was very unlike the Mad Boy: he was genial, helpful, and sweet to the point of masochism. Although he was made farm manager, his gifts were domestic; he was a fine, even overenthusiastic flower arranger and mixer of Bloody Marys, and his party piece was an impersonation of the Queen Mother: he was said “to actually become her.” He clearly excited the sadistic vein in Heber-Percy, who was soon making fun of him (“anything for a shriek!,” as Nancy Mitford said), and in time, when “Hughie” had put on weight and lost his boyish appeal, he was regularly bullied and humiliated in front of others by his friend.

At the same time, the Mad Boy took up with a young estate foreman, known as Garth. Thus he had “the indoor boyfriend and the outdoor boyfriend,” Garth being allowed in the house during the day, but not in the evening for meals. Such a situation, where both boyfriends were put at a disadvantage by the seigneurial Robert, says something that is revealing about class and (of course illegal) homosexuality in the period. At about the same time the writer John Lehmann had moved with his lover Alyosha, a former ballet dancer, to a cottage in Sussex. The devoted Alyosha contributed funds to its purchase, but he was never allowed into the drawing room, a ban he observed even after Lehmann’s death. What a world of fearful prohibitions and swallowed indignities it was.

The most terrifying master-servant bond Zinovieff describes is that between her grandfather and the German cook Rosa Proll, whom he stole from a friend and brought to Faringdon in the late 1950s. Through her brilliance the culinary heyday of the house could be recreated; but her ambitions extended far beyond the kitchen. In Rosa’s slavish devotion to Heber-Percy, Zinovieff

1:20



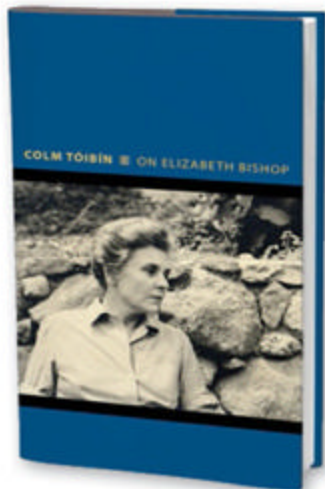
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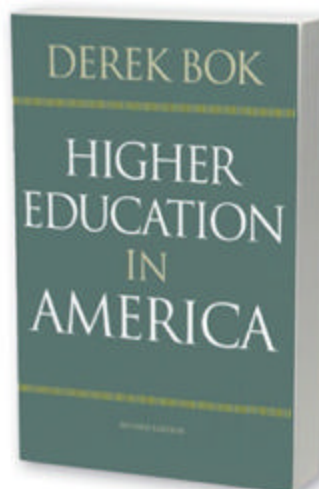
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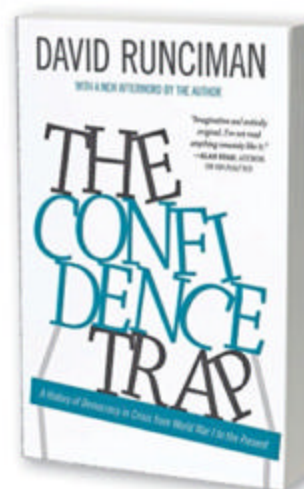
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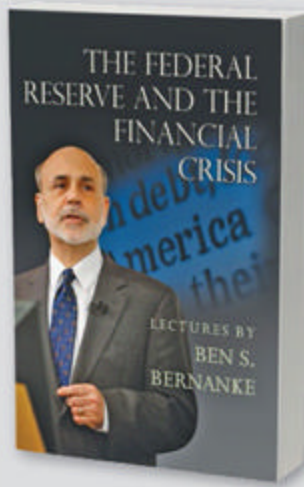
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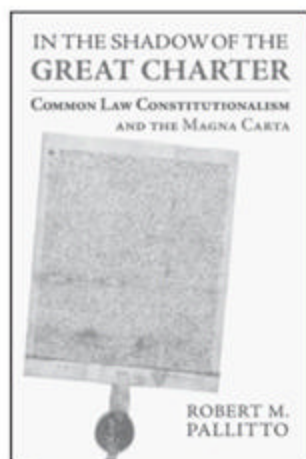
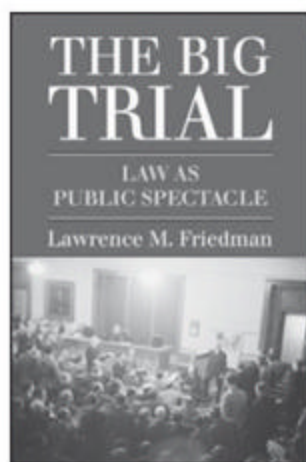
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discerns "an affinity with totalitarianism" (the chapter about her is called simply "The Nazi"). She swiftly banished all the indoor staff, and did all cooking, cleaning, washing, and mending herself, with military exactness.

She then terrorized the outdoor staff, patrolling the grounds with a large dog. "Trespassers on the estate became a thing of the past"; but there were still trespassers on the affections of her master. Against the feeble Hughie she could count on Heber-Percy's collaboration: "Robert was known to pour a bottle of red wine over his lover at dinner and Rosa once poured cold water over Captain Cruddas's head from the first-floor landing." There was a good deal of slapstick, and the reader will cheer when Robert pours a bottle of milk over the head of Rosa herself.

she was at last ejected alive—she met her death, described here in a bleak vignette, knocked down at dawn by a truck on the ring road as she was walking, as she did each day, several miles to her job as cook to another family. She was eighty-five, and in her will left over half a million pounds to a children's charity.

If I dwell on her story, it is because it typifies the way Zinovieff has drawn from obscurity the dozens of lives whose threads converge in this house over nearly a century. Her cast list is vast, and topped by world-famous stars, but among them and behind them come others, creative, dependable, amusing, unhappy (often that), like names in an old visitors' book caught moving again in their dance to the music of time. *The Mad Boy* is



Lord Berners painting a portrait of Penelope Betjeman and her pony in his drawing room, July 1938

Sofka Zinovieff

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The great challenge to her supremacy came in 1985 when at the age of seventy-four Heber-Percy suddenly married his old friend Lady Dorothy Lygon, always known as Coote. Coote, known for her loyalty, kindness, and discretion, had been a close friend of Berners, as she had been of Waugh, who romanced the Lygon family into the Flytes of *Brideshead Revisited*. Her father, Lord Beauchamp, had been forced into exile by a major gay scandal, and she was sensitively attuned to the sexual unorthodoxy of Faringdon. She lived in a little house in the town, but was a constant presence at the big house.

Always said to be unmarriedly plain when young, Coote perhaps lost her head, or her memory, on getting her old friend's proposal. The omens were bad. The furious Rosa, relied on for a wedding banquet, came up with three plates of ham sandwiches. When the couple returned from a gloomy Venetian honeymoon, they found that Rosa had gone, leaving the previous week's dirty dishes in the sink. Coote's married life echoed Jennifer's before her, spurned like an unwelcome guest, but now having to do all the housework as well. In fact the elderly couple were "utterly incapable of looking after themselves," and within weeks Coote had gone back to her cottage and Rosa returned triumphant.

After Heber-Percy's death in 1987, Rosa transferred her loyalty dynastically to Sofka Zinovieff, who found the time that she spent at Faringdon with her young friends still dominated and determined by Rosa, a figure both slave and tyrant, who declared she would only leave the house in a coffin. But

an absorbing as well as original book, which replaces the monographic vectors of biography with something more curious and multifarious, nonetheless brought into a haunting and satisfying shape.

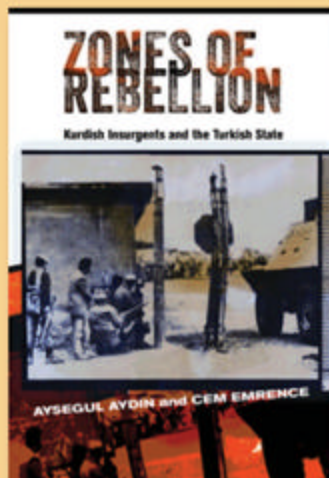
And if the Folly remains the emblem of the era and the place, we see that something of enduring interest happened in this rural backwater eighty years ago. It is magical to me to find here a photo of the old walled gardens that my mother and I went through each Friday in my childhood to buy produce from the estate; two men stand there smiling, Lord Berners, in a trilby, his arm in a sling, and a smaller figure in a dark coat, eyes shadowed by the brim of his cap, who is Igor Stravinsky. In his conversations with Robert Craft, Stravinsky is asked about Berners, and recalls this October weekend in the late 1930s, the "crystal bed" he slept in and the roan horses he rode. He responded especially to an atmosphere that was "not exclusively traditional":

Meals were served in which the food was of one colour pedigree; i.e., if Lord Berners's mood was pink, lunch might consist of beet soup, lobster, tomatoes, strawberries. . . . My wife Vera used to send him saffron dye from France, and a blue powder which he used for making blue mayonnaise.

One notes both the odd suggestiveness of the word "pedigree," as if aristocracy were sublimated into aesthetics; and the evident feeling that one-colored meals were a good idea. It was silliness pursued in all seriousness. □

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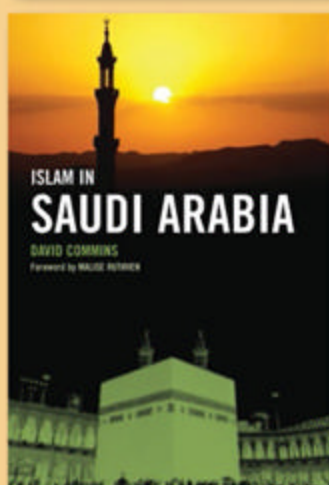
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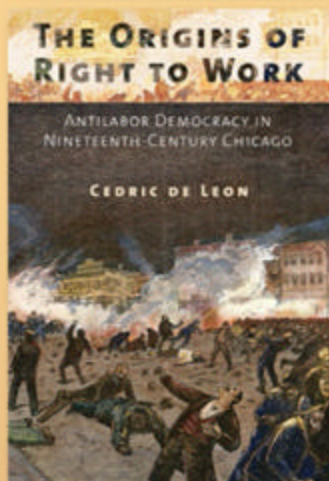
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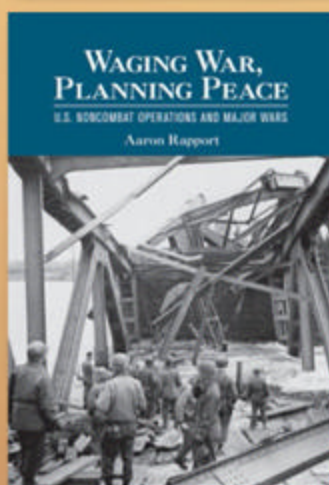
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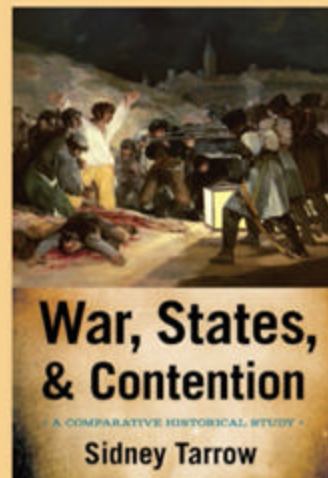
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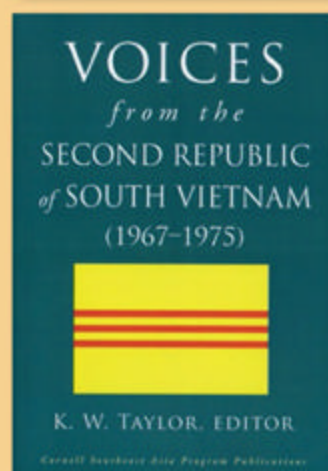


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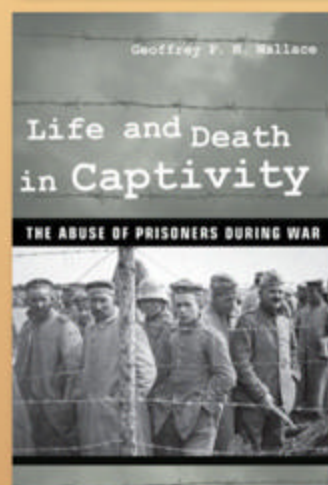
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Bibi: The Hidden Consequences of His Victory

David Shulman

Benjamin Netanyahu has won again. He will have no difficulty putting together a solid right-wing coalition. It's true that his erstwhile ally and present enemy, Moshe Kahlon, a relatively moderate Likudnik who now heads his own party, Kulanu, holds the balance of power between the left and right blocs in his hands; but there's no reason to think that he'll refrain from joining the Netanyahu government, probably as finance minister. With Kahlon's party, the Likud and its hard-core satellites have fifty-four of the 120 Knesset seats. The so-called left, led by the Zionist Union of Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni (which is really somewhere in the center-right) and including the one true leftist party, Meretz (five seats) and the Joint List of Arab Parties, can muster forty-two seats. In the center is Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid—"There Is a Future"—with eleven seats, while the ultra-religious parties hold thirteen seats.

The religious parties have, by now, a very strong affinity with the right, even though historically, not so long ago, large parts of the ultra-religious camp were moderate in their views on making peace with the Palestinians. Compared with the outgoing Knesset—the left with thirty-two seats, “the center” with twenty-seven, the right with forty-three, the religious parties with eighteen—the new one shows a shrinking center and an apparent increase of around ten seats for each of the two largest groupings.

There was a telling shift to the Likud by voters who previously had gone with extreme-right parties such as Naphtali Bennett's Jewish Home (down from twelve to eight). The lunatic right, embodied by the Yachad party of Eli Yishai—the former coleader of the center-right Shas party, who has now allied with Baruch Marzel, once a leading member of the outlawed and racist Kach movement—did not make it past the threshold of 3.25 percent of the total vote. The Arab Joint List, with thirteen seats, is now the third-largest party in the Knesset. One could say that these results reveal a very slight movement of the electorate toward the center-left, with the two major blocs remaining more or less stable and the right still firmly ahead.

But the naked numbers may be deceptive. What really counts is the fact that the Israeli electorate is still dominated by hypernationalist, in some cases protofascist, figures. It is in no way inclined to make peace. It has given a clear mandate for policies that preclude any possibility of moving toward a settlement and that will further deepen Israel's colonial venture in the Palestinian territories, probably irreversibly.

These results would not have come as such a surprise were it not for the opinion polls of the last weeks of the campaign, which mostly showed a groundswell of disaffection with Netanyahu and put the Zionist Union ahead of the Likud by a small margin. The polls—including the early exit polls on election day itself—were dramatically wrong; some of them may well have

Benjamin Netanyahu



been deliberately distorted by the Likud spin experts in order to get traditional Likud supporters to vote, but the huge margin of error—and the polls' wholehearted acceptance at face value by the media—also tell us something about the conceptual bubble that the Tel Aviv pollsters and commentators inhabit.

On the other hand, my own observations suggest that there was also some truth in the polls; in a half-century of living in Israel, I have never seen such intense revulsion against a serving prime minister on the part of so many, and from such widely different parts of the social spectrum. Netanyahu's policies have further impoverished the poor, opened up a growing and dangerous gap between the glittering rich and all the rest, and created an unprecedented crisis in housing. The average selling price of an apartment in Tel Aviv reached 1.75 million shekels—about \$430,000—in 2014; it is next to impossible for a young couple lacking huge savings to buy an apartment anywhere in the major cities, though they could, of course, move to one of the West Bank settlements, where housing for settlers is heavily subsidized and no such problem exists.

Despite all this, and the tedious list of Netanyahu's other egregious failures, his electoral base obviously remains intact. As expected, analyses of the voting patterns show that this base is strongest in the lower middle classes and the geographical and social margins—precisely the population most

hurt by his economic policies. The Zionist Union, an all-too-familiar reincarnation of the old Labor Party with its firmly Ashkenazi elite, made no perceptible inroads among Sephardi voters, for whom the nationalist politics of the Likud and of the hard-core right in general are profoundly consonant with their decades-old resentment of the “white” Ashkenazi establishment.

The center-left, which once was the mainstream, has a dwindling constituency; and the fact that it fielded a decent but lackluster candidate, Isaac “Bougie” Herzog, clearly didn't help matters. In case any voters had forgotten where the lines were drawn, the artist Yair Garboz reminded them at the large leftist rally in Tel Aviv shortly before the election, with his disparaging remarks about Jews who “kiss mezuzas and worship idols.”

I think that deeper currents are also at work in this outcome—for example, the ongoing, ultimately futile effort to squeeze Jewish civilization, in its tremendous variability and imaginative range, into the Procrustean confines of the modern nation-state with its flag and postage stamps and proclivity to violence. Modern nationalism always makes a distorted, very limited selection of the available cultural repertoire, flattening out the potential richness; fanatical atavistic forces tend to take the place of what has been lost. Palestinians suffer from a very similar problem.

Netanyahu's shrill public statements during the last two or three days before the vote may well account in part for the magnitude of the Likud victory. Mind-

ful of his long record of facile mendacity, commentators on the left have tended to characterize these speeches as more dubious “rhetoric”; but I think that, for once, Netanyahu was actually speaking the truth, a popular truth among his traditional supporters. He explicitly renounced his pro forma acceptance of the notion of a two-state solution (in his famous Bar Ilan speech in June 2009) and swore that no Palestinian state would come into existence if he were elected. He promised vast building projects in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. He made it clear that Israel would make no further territorial concessions anywhere, since any land that would be relinquished would, in his view, immediately be taken over by Muslim terrorists. I have the strong feeling that he assumes that all Muslims—maybe all non-Jews?—are potential terrorists.

Then there was his truly astonishing, by now notorious statement on election day itself, in which he urged Jewish voters to rush to the polls because “the Arabs are voting in droves.” One might have thought that those Arab voters were members of the body politic he headed as prime minister. Imagine a white American president calling on whites to vote because “blacks are voting in large numbers.” If there's a choice to be made between democratic values and fierce Jewish tribalism, there's no doubt what the present and future prime minister of Israel would choose.

What does this mean? On the face of it, things are not all that different today than before the election. But the now seemingly impregnable rule of the right has at least four likely consequences for the near and mid-term future.

First, the notion that there will someday be two states in historical Palestine has been savagely undermined. We have Netanyahu's word for it, despite his characteristic waffling on Palestinian statehood in post-election interviews directed at a foreign, English-speaking audience and reflecting intense American pressure. If he has his way, Palestinians are destined for the foreseeable future to remain subject to a regime of state terror, including the remorseless loss of their lands and homes and, in many cases, their very lives. They will continue to be, as they are now, disenfranchised, without even minimal legal recourse, hemmed into small discontinuous enclaves, and deprived of elementary human rights.

Take a mild, almost innocuous example, entirely typical of life in the territories. Last weekend I was in the South Hebron hills with Palestinian shepherds at a place called Zanuta, whose historic grazing grounds have been taken over, in large part, by a settlement inhabited by a single Jewish family. Soldiers turned up with the standard order, signed by the brigade commander, declaring the area a Closed Military Zone; the order is illegal, according to a Supreme Court ruling, but the writ of the court hardly

impinges on reality on the ground in South Hebron. Within minutes, three of the shepherds and an Israeli activist were arrested.

The people of Zanuta live with such arbitrary decrees on a daily basis, as they live under the constant threat of violent assault by Israeli settlers acting with impunity. In short, these Palestinian villagers are slated for dispossession and expulsion. Activists from the Arab-Jewish Partnership (Ta'ayush) are doing what we can to stop the process, but it isn't easy. The situation in the northern West Bank is considerably worse.

Second, we may see the emergence in the West Bank of a situation like that in Gaza, with Hamas or other extremist groups assuming power. It seems ridiculous to have to write this, but in case anyone has any doubt: there is no way a privileged collective can sit forever on top of a disenfranchised, systematically victimized minority of millions. We can expect mass violent protests of one sort or another (maybe, with luck, some large-scale nonviolent protest as well). Sooner or later, the territories will probably explode, and the Palestinian Authority may be washed away. At that point Netanyahu will complain loudly that you can never trust the Arabs.

In fact, however, there is an ongoing, intimate, many-layered relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, and what one side chooses to do always has a very direct impact on the other side. More generally, if we Israelis fail to cut a deal with the Palestinian moderates, or at least to strive in earnest for an agreement, we will by our own actions bring their extremists to power. There is no dearth of examples from recent decades.

Third, Palestinians will rightly turn to the International Criminal Court in The Hague (as early as April 1, according to the official announcement) and to international forums such as the UN Security Council, where Israel may soon no longer enjoy the protection of an automatic American veto. The international boycott will intensify to a level far beyond what we have seen. It may in the end force a change, at immense cost to the cohesion of Israeli society and to the state's claim to legitimacy. In this respect, I think we are approaching the tipping point.

Fourth, and most important, the moral fiber of the country will continue to unravel. Already for years the public space has been contaminated by ugly, violent voices coming from the heart of the right-wing establishment. As Zvi Bar'el has cogently written in *Haaretz*, "Netanyahu has succeeded in overturning the principle that the state exists for the sake of its citizens and putting in its place the Fascist belief that the citizens exist for the state."

In accordance with that belief, there will be more hypernationalist, anti-democratic legislation, more deliberate and consistent attempts to undermine the authority of the courts (especially the Supreme Court), more rampant racism, more thugs in high office, more acts of cruelty inflicted on innocents, more attacks on moderates perceived as enemies of the state, more paranoid indoctrination in the schools, more hate propaganda and self-righteous whining by official spokesmen, more discrimination against the Israeli-Arab population, more wanton destruction of the villages of Israeli Bedouins, more warmongering, and quite possibly more needless war.

To my mind, all of this matters more than the straightforward pragmatic consequences, some of which I have mentioned. The danger from within—to who we are and how we live in the world—is infinitely greater than any external threat. The corruption (I am not talking about money) is already far advanced. Israel has, in effect, knowingly moved further toward a full-fledged apartheid system. Those who don't like the word can suggest another one for what I see each week in the territories and more and more inside the Green Line.

Is there any good news? The Arab Joint List, having won thirteen Knesset seats in the election, is two seats stronger than the combined Arab parties in the outgoing Knesset. A certain tentative awakening was evident in the Arab sector during the campaign. We will have to

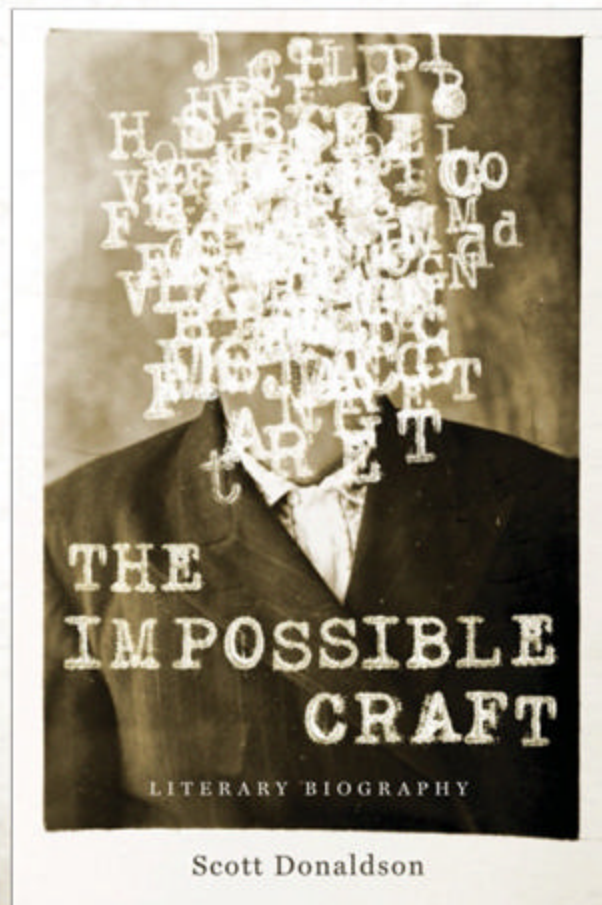
see if it continues. The great discovery of this period was the eloquent, always unruffled, charismatic leader of the Joint List, Ayman Odeh. They have called for full equality for the Arab-Palestinian minority within Israel and for an end to racist discrimination and to the occupation of the West Bank. A little charisma on the left can't hurt. But it won't be enough to challenge the right-wing tide.

Is there a way out of the impasse we've constructed? In the long term, yes. We have work to do. Holding on to hope is part of that work. Though he has now won four elections, it is in the nature of Netanyahu that he will eventually destroy himself (and probably many others along the way). In the end, the alliance between moderates and activists on both sides may turn out to be as strong, or stronger, than the unspo-

ken blood alliance of Netanyahu with Hamas, Hezbollah, and ISIS. We will have many opportunities to test this proposition.

Justice, generosity, and empathy are not foreign to the Jewish tradition, though at times they go underground. Perhaps hope lies in a vision of all the territory west of the Jordan River as somehow more than one state but less than two, under conditions of true equality. Already there are groups within what is left of the Israeli left that, together with Palestinian partners, are thinking creatively, and practically, along these lines. One thing is certain. The demand to fully enfranchise the Palestinians now suffering under Israeli rule will eventually prove irresistible. What happens after that, no one can say. □

—March 26, 2015



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The Queen on Broadway

Zoë Heller

The Audience

a play by Peter Morgan,
directed by Stephen Daldry,
at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre,
New York City, March 8–June 28, 2015

“When a monarch can bless, it is best that he should not be touched,” Walter Bagehot wrote in *The English Constitution*. “It should be evident that he does no wrong. He should not be brought too closely to real measurement. He should be aloof and solitary.”

The impulse behind this advice was less worshipful than shrewd. Monarchy, Bagehot understood, was a magic act; its glamor and beauty—its ability to enlist “the credulous obedience of enormous masses”—could be sustained only as long as the masses were kept at a safe distance from the smoke and mirrors:

Above all things our royalty is to be revered, and if you begin to poke about it you cannot reverence it. When there is a select committee on the Queen, the charm of royalty will be gone. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic.

Bagehot’s warning may have been lost on—or never adequately conveyed to—the younger generations of the modern royal family, but the Queen has heeded it well. She has resisted the magic-killing daylight. Even as her children and grandchildren have succumbed to the lure of self-expression and self-exposure—divulging details of their eating disorders and unhappy marriages, sharing their views on modern architecture, disporting themselves naked in Las Vegas hotel rooms, and so on—she has maintained her potency as a symbol by revealing almost nothing of her personhood. After more than fifty years on the throne, she remains fundamentally unknown by her people. And it is because rather than in spite of this that she is popular among them. (There should be a term for the great many Britons who profess contempt for the royal family, but devotion to their sovereign; they are antimonarchy, but pro-Queen—Queenists, perhaps.)

The playwright Peter Morgan has written two works about, and in praise of, the Queen, both of them suffused with anticipatory nostalgia for the dignity and discipline of her reign. (She will be eighty-nine this year: *après elle, le déluge*.) Morgan’s screenplay for the 2006 film *The Queen*, starring Helen Mirren, was set in the weeks following Princess Diana’s death—a period when the Queen came under growing criticism from her subjects for failing to offer an official expression of grief. The film depicted the Queen’s struggles to understand—and, in the end, make grudging concession to—the country’s slightly hysterical mourning and it left little doubt about where its sympathies lay in the contest between her old-school stoicism and the people’s vulgar emotionalism. In one scene, Tony Blair’s press secretary, Alastair Campbell, refers snidely to the Queen’s “coldness” and an infuriated Blair rebukes him:



Helen Mirren as Queen Elizabeth II in *The Audience*

When you get it wrong, you really get it wrong! That woman has given her whole life in service to her people. Fifty years doing a job she never wanted! A job she watched kill her father. She’s executed it with honor, dignity and, as far as I can tell, without a single blemish, and now we’re all baying for her blood! All because she’s trying to lead the world in mourning for someone who...who threw everything she offered back in her face. And who, for the last few years, seemed committed 24/7 to destroying everything she holds dear!

If the film managed not to melt altogether into a puddle of Queen worship, it was partly due to the restraining influence of Steven Frears’s direction and partly due to Helen Mirren’s uncannily accurate and subtle performance.

The Audience, Peter Morgan’s latest sprightly piece of Queenist propaganda, which also stars Mirren, takes for its minimal dramatic structure the confidential weekly meetings that the Queen has had with her prime ministers over the course of her reign. Morgan portrays these sessions as comically up-

tight in form (he makes a lot of hay with periwigged equerries and royal protocol) but exuberant and intimate in content—the sort of encounters in which, when the footmen recede, John Major might weep about his lack of formal education and Churchill might chummily address the Queen as “Lilibet.”

The play assumes little knowledge of recent British history on the part of its audience. (Quite how little is evidenced by the printed guide distributed along with the playbill, which helpfully identifies Churchill as “an inspirational statesman, writer and leader who led Britain to victory in World War II.”) As a result, the political dialogue never rises much above the crudely expository—“The Churchillian dream is over,” Harold Wilson informs the Queen, “the Empire has gone!”—and the PMs themselves are drawn with exceedingly broad strokes. Gordon Brown is Scottish and depressed. Thatcher (a poorly cast Judith Ivey looking like a Lancashire barmaid) is hectoring and pushy. Harold Wilson is prickly and working-class, but ever such a sweetie underneath. (At his first meeting with the Queen, he taunts her with implausible rudeness and scoffs about the poshness of Buckingham Palace, before collapsing in groveling contrition: “Forgive my impertinence.

I’m a simple man and I’m intimidated by my surroundings.”)

This broadness of tone extends, alas, even to the Queen. It is to be expected that some of the nuance and charm of Morgan’s film *Queen* should be lost on the stage—that Mirren’s perfect imitation of the Queen’s throttled diction should have to be replaced by a less authentic, actressy sonorousness, for example. But the exigencies of a theater performance cannot explain the oddly camp quality this *Queen* has acquired. She mugs. She exclaims. She cocks her eyebrow in the manner of Barbara Stanwyck. She dances a Highland jig.

Which is a problem in a play that presents self-restraint, or at least holding one’s tongue, as the most crucial and onerous of the regal duties. “One thing I think you’ll find all your prime ministers agree on,” David Cameron tells the Queen, “is you have a way of saying nothing yet making your view perfectly clear.” It would be nice if we were ever to see this trick in action, but the Queen never seems to have much need of it. She is far too busy expressing herself in more forthright ways—filling Gordon Brown in on her problems with obsessive-compulsive disorder, telling Harold Wilson how “odious” she finds Ted Heath, musing dreamily on “the unlive lives within us all.”

In one preposterous moment during a conversation with Churchill about whether she should take her husband’s name, Mountbatten, as her own, she cries out, “I may be a queen. I am also a woman and a wife. I want to be in a successful marriage.” It is difficult to believe that the Queen—or any upper-class Englishwoman of her vintage—would utter these words in such a setting, but even harder, perhaps, to credit the idea that she would protest cuts to the royal budget by angrily invoking God’s will.

When John Major cringingly suggests that in order to cut back on expenses, it may be necessary to decommission the royal yacht *Britannia*, the Queen loses her temper. *O reason not the need!* She has given her life to her people, she tells him. She has put her role as Queen above marriage, above motherhood. She *must* have her yacht because she’s worked jolly hard and she was consecrated to do so in the eyes of God. At this point the scene dissolves into a reenactment of her coronation. Strains of Handel’s coronation anthem are heard as the Archbishop of Canterbury anoints her. And then, just before the curtain comes down on the first act, Mirren turns, robed and crowned and sceptered, to face the audience with a basilisk stare.

It is pretty rich that Morgan should ask us to swoon and sympathize with a Queen who invokes the divine right of kings in an argument about why she needs a yacht. And it’s richer still that he should attempt, *in the same play*, to persuade us that the Queen is a woman of deeply liberal convictions. Harold Wilson tells her that she is a “lefty at heart” who understands the concerns of “ordinary people, working people.” (He cites as evidence her worries about the heating bills at Balmoral.) And

Joan Marcus

the Queen agrees. “That’s the Bobo in me,” she says, referring to her salt-of-the-earth Scottish nanny. Further proof of her socialist inclinations is that she doesn’t like Thatcher and that she is outraged by the racist attitudes of Thatcher’s husband, Dennis. (This, given the well-documented racism of several members of the royal family and of the Duke of Edinburgh in particular, seems particularly fanciful on Morgan’s part.)

Speculative fictions about the “real” Queen behind the royal mask tend to

be rather wishful—endowing her with qualities and values that reflect the authors’ own. The Queen in Alan Bennett’s play *A Question of Attribution* is a canny, rather droll figure, with a distinctly Bennetian line in poker-faced ironies. Sue Townsend’s Queen in the novel *The Queen and I* is a tough, no-nonsense lady who adapts to life on a council estate with admirable resourcefulness and vim. Such projections are generally harmless enough.

But Morgan’s portrayal of the Queen as a closeted socialist is a fantasy not

just about her but about the British class system and about what socialism entails. The comforting illusion he purveys in *The Audience* is that the crucial divisions in British society are not those of privilege, but of sensibility. The Queen and Harold Wilson get along splendidly—despite their class differences—because they share a love for Britain and its ancient “social fabric.” (It’s ghastly, uncaring arrivistes like Thatcher who are the trouble.) The moral here—that the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate

need not be at odds with one another, so long as the rich man remembers to be compassionate—seems a particularly sentimental and dishonest way of selling the status quo to a liberal theater audience.

Those who like this sort of thing will be happy to hear that Morgan has not exhausted his interest in Queenist entertainments. His next project, a TV series for Netflix, promises to further explore the relationship between Downing Street and the palace. It is to be called *The Crown*. □

Václav Havel: What He Inspired

Paul Wilson

Havel: A Life

by Michael Žantovský.
Grove, 543 pp., \$30.00

Few people have been better positioned to write about Václav Havel than Michael Žantovský. He had known Havel since the mid-1980s, and was his press secretary, spokesman, and adviser for two and a half years, from early 1990 to mid-1992. During that time, he says, he spent more time with Havel than he did with his own family. In 1992, as Czechoslovakia slid inexorably toward separation, Žantovský left his position (for reasons I will get into later) and, with Havel’s blessing, went on to a distinguished career of his own, first as ambassador to the United States for the new Czech Republic, then as a senator in Prague (where he chaired the Committee on Foreign Relations and sponsored the country’s first Freedom of Information Act), and finally as ambassador to Israel and most recently Great Britain. But they remained in touch and, Žantovský says, Havel “continued to be generous with his time and friendship, across three continents, and whenever the occasion arose.”

I mention these details about Žantovský’s life in part because anyone reading this entertaining, intimate, and moving account of one of the twentieth century’s better-known public figures will learn little about its author. And yet Žantovský’s voice—that of a natural storyteller with an eye for the memorable anecdote, a mischievous wit, an easy intelligence, and a keen sense of balance and fairness—is so engaging that he becomes a presence in the tale he tells.

This was probably not his intention: in his prologue, he makes it clear that he knows the risks involved in writing about a man for whom, he admits, he feels a genuine love. But that love, as he describes it—a combination of profound respect, affection, and trust—is certainly not blind to the foibles and failings of its object; it is more like an intense friendship forged in combat than a purely emotional attachment. On occasions when Havel’s behavior slips into morally or politically questionable territory—his overuse of prescription drugs, his philandering, his support for the invasion of Iraq—you can almost hear the spokesman arguing with the storyteller over how much to explain and how much to simply let



Václav Havel (center) at the *Laterna Magika* theater, Prague, on November 24, 1989, the day that the Communist Party’s leadership resigned. He is with, from left to right, Rita Klímová, who became the first post-Communist ambassador to the US; Alexander Dubček, who had been the Czechoslovak premier during the Prague Spring; and the music critic and broadcaster Jiří Černý, an important member of the Civic Forum’s coordinating committee.

stand. In most cases, the storyteller wins.

Žantovský, however, brings deeper qualifications to the job. Almost thirteen years Havel’s junior, he was a member of a cohort of bright young people who were most deeply affected by the creative forces that Havel and his generation of artists and writers released into society as the pall of Stalinism slowly lifted. Žantovský was an impressionable teenager during Havel’s theatrical heyday in the mid-1960s, and saw the original performances, often several times, of Havel’s early plays like *The Garden Party* and *The Memo*, plays that thrilled audiences and that established Havel as an exciting new playwright, even as they alerted the regime’s cultural guardians to the presence of a new troublemaker. Theater was one of the crucibles in which Havel’s complex understanding of politics was forged: he came to see art, and drama in particular, as one of the chief instruments by which a society becomes aware of itself and thus becomes capable of change. Žantovský was one of many in whom that change began to work its way, and

it gives his account of Havel’s life and ideas an exceptional cultural depth and sensitivity.

In the early 1970s Žantovský studied psychology in Prague and Montreal, then returned home to work in a clinical setting, where he specialized in the psychology of relationships and sexuality, a background that, as it turned out, positioned him to write with compassion and understanding about aspects of Havel’s private life that most of his other biographers have tended to skirt.

In the 1980s Žantovský turned to the more precarious life of a freelance man of letters, writing lyrics for pop singers and translating writers as diverse as James Baldwin, Nadine Gordimer, Joseph Heller, and Tom Stoppard into Czech. The most unusual item in Žantovský’s work at that time is an extended essay, written in the late 1980s, on Woody Allen, many of whose films and stories he subtitled and translated. (In the interest of disclosure, Žantovský interviewed me for the book under review in one of Allen’s old haunts, the Carnegie Deli on Seventh Avenue.) All of this experience clearly helped to give him the confidence to

write the book in English rather than in Czech. It was a deliberate choice: as he told me recently, it gave him some necessary distance from Havel and the often claustrophobic Czech milieu, and allowed him to look at his subject through “a long lens.” For the reader, paradoxically, it lends his portrait of Havel an immediacy that could easily have been lost in translation.

Statesmen who are not writers may leave behind them at most a diary, a memoir, or a forgettable ghostwritten campaign biography or two. But in addition to the mountain of documentary evidence about Havel’s life now accumulating in the Václav Havel Library in Prague, his biographers also have to deal with a prolific writer who was adept at fashioning his own powerful narrative.

Havel left behind at least three major autobiographical works, each of which was produced under unusual circumstances. First came a collection of letters written in prison in the late 1970s and early 1980s under strict censorship (*Letters to Olga*); that was followed by a book-length interview conducted via underground courier in the mid-1980s with a Czech journalist in exile, Karel Hvížd’ala (*Disturbing the Peace*, called *Long-Distance Interrogation* in Czech); and finally there is his post-presidential memoir, *To the Castle and Back*, an odd intertwining of three different strands: interviews with Hvížd’ala; slightly unsettling diary entries that suggest, at times, a man on the run from his former life; and memos written to his office staff by a micro-managerial president suffering under the self-imposed burden of writing his own speeches. Over the years, Havel’s own version of his life has acquired an almost canonical status, yet as far as I know, he was never protective of that version nor did he ever try to interfere with how journalists and filmmakers chose to portray him. That may be another reason why Žantovský’s account of his life feels so uninhibited.

Yet despite calling Havel “the ultimate WYSIWYG”—what you see is what you get—Žantovský admits that there remains something about him beyond reach. “Mixed with the warmth and the friendliness,” he writes, was “a certain remoteness... a sense of detachment, an inner impenetrable core

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that you could never enter." It's something other Havel biographers have noted as well.

Žantovský observes that one of the more obvious "gaping holes" in Havel's account of his childhood is the almost complete absence of any reference to his mother, Božena. Žantovský speculates that, for all the care and attention she lavished on her two sons (Havel's brother Ivan is two years younger), there was something missing, perhaps a deeper emotional bond that may have amplified Havel's natural insecurities and left him with the "deep ambivalence towards the opposite sex" that was evident during his adulthood. "For all his life," Žantovský writes,

Havel instinctively sought the company of strong, dominant, directive women who could assuage his sense of helplessness and insecurity. At the risk of using a tired psychoanalytical cliché, they all, in one way or another, resembled his mother.

This might be of only passing interest except that, as Žantovský points out, complex and lopsided relations between men and women are frequent motifs in Havel's plays; otherwise he seemed to prefer the company of men, "where he was more often than not the dominant figure." When Havel became president, though he tended to surround himself with women (at one point inviting satirical comparisons with Muammar Qaddafi because he had two glamorous female bodyguards), he never gave women positions of any authority in his office, with the exception of his legal team and his literary agent, Anna Freimanová. "Ultimately, perhaps," Žantovský says, "he preferred to rely on women to protect his personal well-being and interests."

Havel's decades-long relationship with his first wife, Olga, was in "a category of its own," Žantovský says. Three years older than Havel, Olga was a strong, blunt, down-to-earth woman from Žižkov, a proudly working-class part of Prague. Olga's parents were in the Communist Party (a fact Žantovský doesn't mention), but she was unable to finish high school because she refused to join the Union of Socialist Youth, an act of almost unthinkable defiance at the time. This may have been yet another reason, apart from snobbery, why Havel's mother never warmed to Olga. Havel fell for her when he was still in his teens and she held him at bay for three years before finally relenting. They married eight years later, in 1964, at a private ceremony in Žižkov. Havel's parents were not invited.

As Žantovský describes it, theirs was a far from ideal marriage, yet there was a curious stability to it despite Havel's frequent flings and at least three serious affairs (of which he dutifully informed Olga, to square things with his conscience). Havel's letters to Olga from prison—to the extent that he directed them specifically to her—mostly concern domestic issues; the one exception, in which Havel reluctantly attempts to write her a kind of "love letter," was excluded from the "canonical" version of *Letters to Olga*, and from Havel's collected works.

In the end, Olga stood by Havel in her own independent fashion, and though she did not want him to become president, she made a wonderful first lady, somewhat in the Eleanor Roosevelt

mold. Despite her dislike of the lime-light, she came to be more popular with the Czech public than her husband, and when she died in January 1996 of cancer, the demonstrations of public emotion were almost unprecedented. A year later, Havel married the actress Dagmar Veškrnová in a ceremony in the same office in Žižkov where he had married Olga. In marrying Olga, he had defied his mother; in marrying Dagmar, he was defying Czech public opinion.

Žantovský has arranged the salient points of Havel's life in forty-seven short chapters like pearls along a chronological string. The pacing is brisk, but the structure allows him, when necessary, to delve more deeply



Václav Havel with his wife Olga at the premiere of his play *Largo Desolato*, Prague, April 1990

into important moments or relationships or circumstances in Havel's life. One thing that stands out is how often Havel stirred up controversy by challenging the limits imposed on public discussion by the regime and disrupting its carefully planned agendas. It began with his very first public appearance, before a gathering of young writers in 1956, when Havel had just turned twenty, in which he criticized a new official literary magazine for championing ideas already pioneered by older, now officially ignored writers. It continued in a speech delivered to a writer's meeting in 1965 exposing the shifty liberalism of reform Communists; his 1968 essay "On the Theme of an Opposition" that challenged the limits of the Prague Spring reforms; and his 1975 open letter to the Party's first secretary and later president, Gustav Husák, which galvanized opposition to the regime around a penetrating critique of post-invasion "normalization" politics.

The following year came his penetrating condemnation of the trial of Ivan Jirous, manager of the Plastic People of the Universe, and other underground musicians that signaled a crucial shift in the tactics of Czechoslovak dissent; and then, in 1978, his most influential essay, "The Power of the Powerless," commissioned by the Polish dissident Adam Michnik, had a large impact on the conduct of dissent across Central Europe. Long before he became a politician, Havel's writing was already a significant political force in Czechoslovakia.

Žantovský's treatment of Havel's time in prison in the early 1980s, and of

his letters to Olga, is revealing even to someone who has spent much time with those letters, as I have. The fact that Havel's arrest in late May 1979 took place at the home of his mistress at the time helps to explain his early anxiety, especially regarding Olga's apparent reluctance to write to him. Havel, Žantovský says, knew "his marriage to Olga was on the rocks at exactly the moment when he was least able to do anything about it."

But Havel's prison letters are important for other reasons too. Prison censorship restricted Havel to writing about family matters, so he turned to writing about himself, something he had generally avoided doing in the past: "Rarely has anyone engaged in introspection as thorough and as eloquently recorded as Havel did in his letters to Olga," Žantovský writes.

For a student of the soul, they provide an embarrassment of riches. Havel came to the task equipped with a writer's lexicon, with self-discipline and with the analytical tools of a student of phenomenology and existential thought.

In this regard, his time in prison was a kind of watershed. If, as Žantovský says, prison made Havel "uniquely well prepared for the single-minded focus towards the tasks ahead," it also led him to develop a self-referential habit of mind that would mark his writing and many of his utterances ever afterward.

Žantovský's evocative account of the "Velvet Revolution" and the first two and a half years of Havel's tenure as president of Czechoslovakia is lively and often hilarious. The first six months of 1990, when Havel staffed his office with old friends from the dissident days, were a time of high spirits and grand initiatives on many fronts. Havel was at the peak of his popularity at home, and this gave his presidency a power and influence beyond his constitutional authority. Internationally he was a celebrity, honored in Washington, feted in New York, and welcomed, albeit with somewhat comic awkwardness, in the Kremlin. Diplomatically, he moved quickly to patch up relations with Germany and repair the ill feelings caused by the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia after World War II. He even found time to oversee a radical renovation of the dreary Communist-era décor in the president's office in the Prague Castle.

After the first free elections in June 1990, as the reality of democratic politics sank in, the Camelot-like atmosphere around Havel began to evaporate. The organization he had helped to form, the Civic Forum, soon started to split into two factions. Over the next two years, serious cracks in the federation appeared and widened. In an effort to stem the slide toward separation, Havel proposed constitutional amendments he thought would help to resolve the crisis. He even held a rally in Wenceslas Square to pressure parliament to act. Nothing worked.

By early 1992 it was clear that Havel's personal aversion to political parties and his faith in "nonpolitical politics," both legacies of his dissident days, were hampering his ability to work with parliament. Žantovský and other close advisers did everything they could to

persuade Havel to create some kind of “political machine” or even a cross-party alliance of supporters to back his legislative proposals. Havel politely declined, and Žantovský did the honorable thing and moved on.

Ever afterward Havel would see the breakup of Czechoslovakia as his greatest political defeat. But to be fair, it’s still not clear, even to this day, that he or his ideas could have saved the federation, since the root problem, I believe, was a structural one beyond anyone’s immediate control. The bicameral federal legislature created by the Communist state, and adopted “as is” by the new democracy in its misguided eagerness to ensure some kind of continuity with the past, was not a real parliament, but rather a pseudo-institution that merely appeared to balance Czech and Slovak interests, while maintaining the Party’s absolute control over everything.

Moreover, after 1989, none of the major new political parties had a federal organization or federal representatives, which meant that, apart from the now utterly discredited Communist Party, no one in the new democracy, least of all Havel, had either the time, the experience, or the means to deal with a crisis of that magnitude and urgency.* Probably nothing short

*The one exception was Václav Klaus’s Civic Democratic Party (ODS). Before the elections of June 1992 that set the stage for Czechoslovakia’s breakup, the ODS attempted to expand into Slovakia, and did offer a federal slate of candidates. It failed, however, to elect a single candidate in Slovakia, and it’s

of a radical revamping of the electoral laws and major constitutional amendments could have averted the breakup. The miracle was that it happened in such a civil fashion, and that may have been due, in part, to Havel’s calming influence.

Havel became president of the new Czech Republic in 1993, but he never really regained the enthusiasm for the job he displayed in those first two and a half years. There were remarkable achievements in which Havel had an important part: the country joined the EU, he pushed hard for NATO expansion, and his renown continued to give the country a positive international profile. At the same time, however, he had to endure the hostility of the most powerful politician in the country, Václav Klaus, who openly opposed most of his ideas. Havel’s deep distrust of party politics and its corollary, his abiding belief in the importance of renewing the civil society, were two issues on which the two men were never able to

still an open question whether Klaus acted out of a last-minute effort to bring the country together by extending his authority into Slovakia, or as a way of demonstrating that a majority of Slovak voters rejected his radical economic reforms and so were a millstone better jettisoned in the interests of rapid transformation. In any case, after that election, Klaus—as the new Czech premier—became one of the strongest proponents of separation. Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this review at www.nybooks.com.

see eye to eye, to the detriment of the country’s democratic evolution.

Their political differences had a common source that neither man may have fully understood. The only model of party politics immediately available to them was the Communist Party, which was not designed to compete for the right to govern, but rather to seize and hold power, exclusively and forever if possible. Klaus, a market economist, took from that model his understanding that even in a multiparty democracy with free elections, political parties exist to exercise power, and, Žantovský says, he saw nongovernmental organizations as “just so many self-appointed advocacy groups for partial interests”—in other words, as barely legitimate constraints on power, and he consistently blocked Havel’s efforts to give nonprofit organizations special tax status.

Havel distrusted political parties for the same reason Klaus embraced them, and that prevented both men from seeing that in a democracy, political parties are not antithetical to civil society but a part of it. Every social organization, be it a political party or a kennel club, must follow a governance structure that is, in essence, a school of democracy.

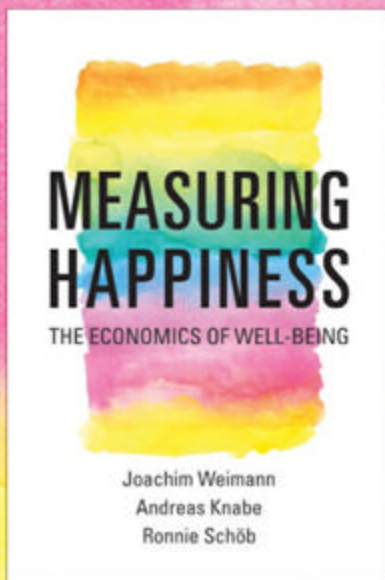
It would be wrong to come away from Žantovský’s book with the impression that Havel’s story illustrates the “great man” theory of history, that historical events are driven by strong leaders, or that he somehow embodied the ancient dream of a “philosopher-king.” Havel’s leadership was of a different

kind, one that seems more unusual the more closely one examines it. Havel epitomized a moment in history that he helped shape, but the moment was also bigger than he was.

He created no lasting institutions, but he did speak for his country’s higher aspirations, and by identifying qualities that mattered—responsibility, respect for truth, the belief that acting freely expands the potential of freedom—he inspired people to unlock these qualities in themselves. His authority was a distillation of the authority that everyone has in a free society: the capacity to act in harmony with one’s conscience, without regard for personal gain or personal safety.

Havel’s kind of authority is impossible to institutionalize or codify, and he did not try; he did not revolutionize the office of the president, but he made the most of it, just as he made the most of his unofficial leadership of the dissident movement. And though his last years as president were not happy ones, burdened as they were by illness, insecurities, and a loss of popularity, the important thing, obvious to anyone who has known the country before and after Havel, is that the Czech Republic now has the very thing he most wished for it to have: an active civil society, in which the peculiar Czech genius for creating small institutions driven by vision and passion can have full rein, and which, if it continues to flourish, may eventually do what Havel hoped it would—infect the country’s political culture with the same sense of responsibility for the public good that drove his best efforts, and that is still democracy’s best hope. □

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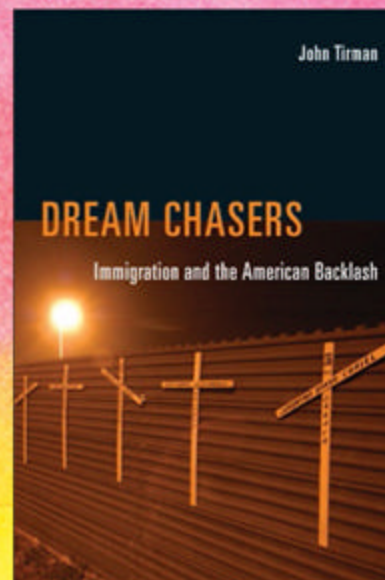
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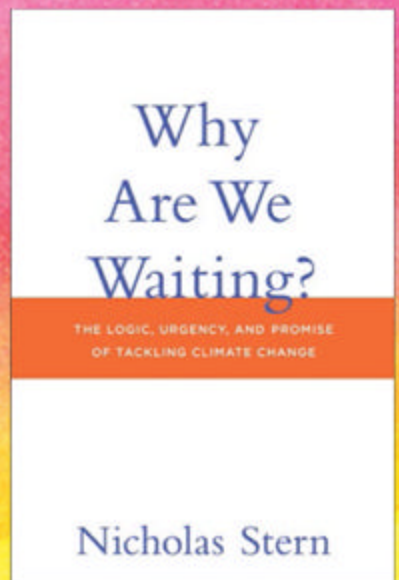
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Self-Reliance

Diane Johnson

Outline

by Rachel Cusk.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
249 pp., \$26.00

1.

Rachel Cusk's new novel, *Outline*, has been praised as a fresh direction, perhaps an artistic advance from her previous work. Her earlier novels are well written, conventional, and self-revealing; and *Outline* is well written, arty, and reticent. She has written seven novels before it, receiving a Whitbread Prize for her first, *Saving Agnes*, and was shortlisted for later ones. She has also written three controversial memoirs. One is a travel book about Italy that brought her the menace of lawsuits (*The Last Supper*); the other two recount her experiences of motherhood (*A Life's Work*) and then divorce (*Aftermath*). In both of those books she detailed her personal views as an apostate from received opinions and brought down vicious reactions in the British press.

Cusk, who was born in Canada and now lives in London, has been described as "the most hated" novelist in Britain, and this judgment is directed not at her writing but at her character and her social attitudes. Most of the opprobrium arose from her motherhood book, which is frank and funny, and the strong reaction to it exposes the hypocrisy of official pieties. In it she dares to say that motherhood is not an unalloyed joy, and attempts to explain the cultural roots of the reasons it was difficult for her: "Motherhood, for me, was a sort of compound fenced off from the rest of the world. I was forever plotting my escape from it..." As she put it in *Aftermath*, she had been socialized as a man:

To act as a mother, I had to suspend my own character, which had evolved on a diet of male values. And my habitat, my environment, had evolved that way too. An adaptation would be required. But who was going to be doing the adapting?...

Finding herself unable to adapt, Cusk explains that she did two things: she "conscripted" her husband into giving up his job and staying home with the children, while she taught in a university. We can all imagine how this arrangement worked out; but she dissects the attempt with elaborate analogies to Clytemnestra and Abraham, the high tone recalling, say, Joan Didion's memoirs. But whereas everyone can empathize with Didion's experience of grief for the death of loved ones, Cusk's willful self-destructiveness seems not to have evoked much pity from the harsh sisterhood of her critics. One, in a piece later awarded the prize for the Hatchet Job of the Year, wrote:

Cusk herself seems extraordinary—a brittle little dominatrix and peerless narcissist who exploits her husband and her marriage with relish. She tramples anyone close



Rachel Cusk, Wells-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, August 2014

to her, especially Clarke [the husband], whom she has forced to give up his job in order to look after the kids. She pours scorn on his "dependence" and "unwaged domesticity," but won't do chores herself because they make her feel, of all things, "unsexed." She is horrified when he demands half of everything in the divorce: "They're my children," she snarls. "They belong to me."

Understandably stung by the bad press, Cusk responded with indignation in *The Guardian*; she seemed especially irritated by a reviewer who wrote, "If everyone were to read this book, the propagation of the human race would virtually cease, which would be a shame." Cusk notes:

The reviewer was a woman. I had met her, in fact, at some literary festival or other years before. She had seemed harmless enough: I would not have suspected her of such drastic reach, such annihilating middle-class smugness ("which would be a shame")....

On and on it went, back and forth: I was accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual. One curious article questioned the length of my sentences: how had I, a mother, been able to write such long and

complicated sentences? Why was I not busier, more tired? Another reviewer—a writer!—commanded her readers not to let the book fall into the hands of pregnant women. The telephone rang and rang.

Among the other personal attacks she received was this one:

Frankly, you are a self-obsessed bore: the embodiment of the Me! Me! Me! attitude which you so resent in small children. And everything those children say or do is—in your mind—really about you. Sooner or later, you end up in family therapy, because it has never occurred to you that it might be an idea to simply bring children up to be happy, or to consider happiness as an option for yourself.... Talk about navel-gazing.

Such *ad feminam* vitriol would be rare in the US, but sometimes a writer does become a public person whose life and character are discussed in newspapers—Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal come to mind. And we can remember controversies surrounding Erica Jong or Bret Easton Ellis—the latter got hate mail and death threats "as if 'American Psycho' had returned us to some bygone age when books were still a matter of life and death instead of something to distract us on a flight between JFK and LAX," as Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote in 1991.

But literary celebrity is the exception with us unless it involves crime, poli-

tics, or sexual transgression. England, of course, takes letters more seriously and is a smaller pond, so Cusk's domestic confessions even occasioned a disapproving, sanctimonious 2012 editorial in *The Guardian* that somewhat inconsistently defends free speech ("Nothing is unwritable. Indeed, the unwritable is precisely what needs to be written"), but includes the suggestion that perhaps she shouldn't be writing about "the private agony of her family." We need to expose

to the light of day the disturbing truth of the human condition. But can children really be counted as acceptable collateral damage in the self-styled vocation of the artist? Whatever the judgment one reaches here, this sort of literature is a high-wire act with very considerable consequences for success and failure. Sometimes too many others will pay the price for one's own cherished sense of honesty.

Criticism such as this chooses to ignore her manner and concentrate on deploring the content of her work. Possibly such irritation is brought on by Cusk's consistently perceptible distaste for most people and things, a kind of vivid misanthropy born, one supposes, of an initial and entirely well-meaning credulity about life, motherhood, and marriage. Her sour pronouncements may come too close to what people don't like to admit they feel too, and, frankly, earlier criticism may also have been brought on by the occasional notes of self-satisfaction, as in her depiction, in *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy*, of her perfect children forgoing swimming, though they are on a beach, in their eagerness to hear Cusk read Shakespeare aloud and do the voices of all three witches.

She may earn forgiveness with the chastened tone, in a recent *New York Times* article, "Raising Teenagers: The Mother of All Problems," in which she is now the thoroughly daunted mother of adolescents. She's learned that "it is perhaps unwise to treasure [the perfect family] story too closely or believe in it too much, for at some point the growing child will pick it up and turn it over in his hands like some dispassionate reviewer composing a coldhearted analysis of an overhyped novel."

For Americans, the English criticism of Cusk's funny and perspicacious books can seem somehow dated. When it comes to attitudes toward marriage and motherhood, each society seems to move at its own pace, now revering, now revising, what is to be the woman's lot, recycling the options in a kind of time warp that makes the British at the moment seem behind or possibly ahead of us in their humorless reverence for stay-at-home motherhood (as the French do in their scorn for breastfeeding). Where we have Sheryl Sandberg cheering us on to get parking places at work, they are stuck with Penelope Leach telling them that to spend one minute away from baby is to squander a priceless life experience.

Richard Saker/Contour by Getty Images

A *Life's Work* may have found many more sympathetic readers in our country than in England—at least it found this one.

To the surprise of no one whose husband has been set to doing the housework, Cusk's next memoir, *Aftermath*, explored their divorce. Critics complained both that she wrote too much about herself and that she didn't go into enough detail about the problems that led her and her husband to separate. Now too, things continued going wrong for Cusk:

[A lawyer] told me I was obliged to support my husband financially, possibly for ever. But he's a qualified lawyer, I said. And I'm just a writer. What I meant was, he's a man. And I'm just a woman. The old voodoo still banging its drum. The solicitor raised her eyebrows, gave me a bitter little smile. Well, then he knew exactly what he was doing, she said.

Another *Guardian* critic, reviewing *Aftermath*, invokes a comparison with Pol Pot as an operative force in "Cusland." Cusk meekly responds that she can see that "like all intolerance, [this overreaction by her critics] arose from dependence on an ideal. I see that cruelty and rudeness and viciousness are its harbingers, as they have always been."

2.

In the light of all the nastiness, Cusk's new novel, *Outline*, is written with an almost reactionary flatness of affective response, forestalling any inferences about the author, though we are told that Faye, the narrator, is a writer going to Athens to teach a creative writing class, something Cusk may well have done. On the plane, her seatmate tells her his story, and when she gets to her class, she instructs its members to tell their stories, or the outlines thereof, explaining the title, which is further clarified by the final speaker.

Faye tells us some of the things she does during her stay in Athens, but much of the narrative is taken up by stories the writing students or her friends take turns telling, while her own story is resolutely withheld; no epiphanies, no resolution. The students, asked to describe something they noticed on the way to class, describe dogs and handbags. She assigns them the task of writing a story involving an animal, so there are animal stories. Evenings, she goes out with friends who tell stories, and one day during her stay in Athens, the Greek guy Faye met on the plane invites her for a ride on his boat. She accepts, but jumps into the water to avoid his attempt to kiss her.

Some critics have wanted more of Faye's interaction with this man. If in a novel there is a hint of sexual possibility between two characters, readers will focus on it, never mind the real subject of the work. This problem of readerly predilections is likely to have been in Cusk's mind at some point, and given that most of her books have been memoirs or seemingly autobiographical novels, she may well now find discouraging the widespread approval she's getting for writing herself out of this book. Compared to her other work and its reception, *Outline*'s sparse lack of nar-

rative direction seems self-protective or the result of a wish to punish. Either way, having been taken to task for being autobiographical, she has chosen another path here into stylish modernism, whether permanently remains to be seen. Will she return to a more voluble self?

At the end of Faye's stay in Athens, another writer, Anne, takes over the narrative and her story strangely merges with Faye's own (and maybe with Cusk's). Like Faye, on the way to Athens, the newcomer Anne had found herself sitting next to a man on the plane with whom she has a long conversation. He has left his family back in Canada to move to Athens and a new post, but though good at languages, he has failed to learn Greek. Anne proposes that it's because of the absence of his family, but he doesn't accept her explanation. Because, in her view, he refuses to take responsibility for his own failure to learn Greek, the conversation lapses; she has nothing more to say to him, rather like Cusk and the reader of *Outline*.

Another of the stories Faye hears reprises a principal subject of the novel, and is told by her friend Paniotis. This is the story of a woman writer, Angeliki, who has written a novel about a woman painter "whose artistic life is gradually being stifled by her domestic arrangements," and who has come to feel that her own work is "merely decorative, a pastime, while her husband's is considered not just by him but by the world to be important." The narratives of the woman, her creator Angeliki, Angeliki's friend Paniotis, and Faye are nested like Russian dolls, distancing Cusk herself from the condition described—the essential problem of the female artist and a central preoccupation of Cusk's, who has elsewhere described this feeling as hers.

The new writing teacher, Anne, recounting a traumatic experience, says she had begun

to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident [when someone tried to strangle her] a sense of who she now was.

Seeing the self as a malleable shape is a classic description of the writer's gift, or plight. Keats's was the best-known definition of this state of "negative capability"—"when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Anne's description of fluid and faceless identity leads to the neutrality Cusk seems to be striving for here, in light of the criticism of her real self. Faye refers to it with an anecdote about her two children, who passed from a state of negative capability in which they shared an imaginary world to each having his own point of view, fact-based, disputing and depending on justice to prove who was right. Despite the charms of vindication, Cusk seems to be renouncing point of view.

3.

It may strike us that besides how accomplished Cusk's memoirs on moth-

erhood and divorce are, her novel *Outline* and some other recent novels, for instance Joseph O'Neill's *The Dog*, also resemble essays, or are essays, as much as they are conventional novels. *The Dog* begins like an essay on diving:

Perhaps because of my growing sense of the inefficiency of life lived on land and in air, of my growing sense that the accumulation of experience amounts, when all is said and done and pondered, simply to extra weight, so that one ends up dragging oneself around as if imprisoned in one of those Winnie the Pooh suits of explorers of the deep, I took up diving.

Or is this a memoir? To note the decline of the novel is hardly original—José Ortega y Gasset was talking about it in the 1920s: "When I hear a friend, particularly if he is a young writer, calmly announce that he is working on a novel, I am appalled." For all we know, Daniel Defoe may have been saying the same thing. Would he now call *Robinson Crusoe* "creative non-fiction," the currently fashionable term that means that some of it is made up?

Cusk's nonfiction account of her divorce starts in exactly the same relaxed, confiding tone as, say, Emerson, whose famous essay "Self-Reliance" begins: "I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional." "Man-kind, says a Chinese manuscript, which my friend M. was obliging enough to read and explain to me, for the first seventy thousand ages ate their meat raw," writes Charles Lamb. "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like 'I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive...,'" writes Hunter S. Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. As novels change their form and melt into memoir, so these forms also merge with what we are still calling the personal essay, so that novel, memoir, essay, and even news reports begin to sound like each other, most often governed by the "I." What explains this selfie-enhanced urge to testimony, and for privileging subjectivity over authority?

Cusk's nonfiction essays in *Aftermath* begin with all of the momentum of a novel or a memoir: "Recently my husband and I separated, and over the course of a few weeks the life that we'd made broke apart, like a jigsaw dismantled into a heap of broken-edged pieces." *Outline* begins in the same tone:

Before the flight I was invited for lunch at a London club by a billionaire I'd been promised had liberal credentials.... The billionaire had been keen to give me the outline of his life story.... I wondered whether in fact what he wanted now was to be a writer, with [a] literary magazine as his entree. A lot of people want to be writers: there was no reason to think you couldn't buy your way into it.

This blend of perceptiveness and cynicism follows the characteristic pattern of her prose: a statement or description, here that the billionaire wants to tell his story. Next, what the writer makes of it: I wondered what he wanted. Then, a generalization: "A



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lot of people want to be writers"; and an often wise but disenchanted conclusion (there was no reason to think you couldn't buy your way into it). The observations are acute; the generalizations are educated and unexpected; the sophistication and originality of her conclusions are the reason her writing

is so interesting. One critic says, not entirely with disapproval, "This is writerly greed, swooping on everything and wringing meaning from it, transforming it into something else rather than just letting it be."

In earlier work, Cusk is often given to flights of censoriousness or

self-congratulation, but in *Outline* it's the rationing of her observations one rather regrets, as if she intends a kind of punishment by flatness. This attenuation seems to be the lesson taught by motherhood, as she gracefully suggests in her *New York Times* essay. In the past, her account of motherhood

seemed, "suddenly, to have contained too much of the sound of myself. When you declaim, you can't listen. When you insist, you miss the opportunity to learn something new." It remains to be seen what effect this realization will continue to have on her fiction in the future. □

Monsters Together

John Lukacs

**The Devils' Alliance:
Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939–1941**
by Roger Moorhouse.
Basic Books, 382 pp., \$29.99

In the vast literature about Stalin and Hitler during World War II, little is said about their being allies for twenty-two months. That is more than an odd chapter in the history of that war, and its meaning deserves more attention than it has received.

Two factors were involved in this neglect. One was that after Hitler chose to conquer Russia he did not succeed; Stalin emerged as one of the supreme victors of World War II. The other was the Western Powers' relative lack of interest in Eastern Europe. Yet the war broke out in 1939 because of Eastern Europe, as a result of the British (and French) decision to oppose the German conquest of Poland. The political earthquake of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939, nine days before the outbreak of war on September 1, did not deter Britain and France from declaring war on Germany upon its invasion of Poland. This is one of the few—very few—decisions in their favor at the time. That they were reluctant in the months that followed to wage war seriously against Germany is another story.

Three quarters of a century have now passed since 1939. A fair amount has been written about the Nazi-Soviet Pact since then, mostly by Eastern European writers and historians. *The Devil's Alliance* is a good account by the British historian Roger Moorhouse of what the pact meant for Hitler and Stalin—and, worse, for its victims. Perhaps the book's most valuable part deals with the immediate consequences of the pact in 1939. Before then, obviously and stridently, Nazism and communism were outright enemies. From the very beginning of his political rise Hitler described Judaism and communism as his principal enemies. Stalin, by that time, was less of an ideologue. Like Hitler, he was a nationalist; he had little interest in international communism.

In May 1939 Hitler recognized that in a German war with the West, Russia could be neutral. But to bring that about would not be simple; Russia would have to get something in return. During that summer a British-French delegation seeking some kind of a military alignment with Russia got nowhere. There were high German officials and diplomats, foremost among them Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, who were much inclined to a German-Russian deal. Meanwhile in Moscow Stalin had already moved: in early May he dismissed his foreign



Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov signing the Nazi-Soviet Pact, with German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop directly behind him, next to Stalin, August 23, 1939

minister, the Jewish Maxim Litvinov, replacing him with Vyacheslav Molotov (who would remain his foreign minister during the war and well after). Hitler understood what that meant. In August Ribbentrop flew to Moscow to sign a Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact; a photograph of Ribbentrop with pen in hand shows Stalin visibly content in the background. Hitler hoped this near-fantastic event might deter the British and the French from going to war with him over Poland. That did not happen, although Stalin was not disappointed with that.

What was more important than the Non-Aggression Pact was its addendum, a Secret Protocol, that called for nothing less than a division of Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, part of which was to be taken over by the Soviets. In addition, Germany recognized Russia's "sphere of interest" in Estonia, Latvia, Finland, some of Lithuania, and the Romanian province of Bessarabia. Moscow denied the very existence of this Secret Protocol for a long time, well beyond World War II. But it existed in the German archives; and in 1939 it became a somber and dreadful reality. As late as 1986 the aged Molotov (then over ninety) denied its very existence to a Russian journalist. In fact, many of its conditions survived both the world war and the succeeding conflicts until 1989.

Poland, its army and its people,

fought the Germans bravely for a month in 1939 (almost as long as France, with its considerable army, in 1940). But seventeen days after the German invasion Stalin's armies invaded Poland from the east. A few days later in Brest, a meeting place then just on the Russian side of the new partition of Poland, there was a small joint military parade of Nazi and Soviet soldiers and military vehicles. Just over two months later, less than three months after the outbreak of World War II, the only fighting on land in Europe was between Russians and Finns, who would not accept Russian control of their country. The British were aghast. They (and the French) even considered, briefly, intervening, but this did not come about. Soon Hitler's armies conquered Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium—and then France. Churchill and Britain stood alone, for more than a year to come.

At the end of September 1939 Ribbentrop flew to Moscow once more to arrange some border deals that would carry out the Secret Protocol. Throughout the war, of all Germany's high officials, he was the most inclined to seek and keep agreements with the Russians. (His counterpart among the Russians, Molotov, had often reciprocal inclinations.) In this respect we may also notice the reciprocal tendencies of Hitler and Stalin. Hitler thought it necessary to carry out the terms of the alliance with Stalin; Stalin, for his part, was more enthusiastic about it than Hitler. One example is his perhaps un-

necessary toast to Hitler after the signing of their pact on August 24, 1939: "I know how much the German nation loves its Führer, I should therefore like to drink to his health." More telling for the historical record and more consequential for the peoples of Eastern Europe were the Soviets' intentions and their aggressive behavior soon after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

On the day of Ribbentrop's second visit to Moscow the Russian pressure on the Baltic states began. Russia demanded changes in the Baltic governments, first in Estonia, then its neighbors Latvia and Lithuania. More important, now Russia stationed many troops in those countries, particularly in their seaports, drastically reducing their independence. Their governments were under pressure to defer to Soviet orders and, except for Finland, did so. Two months later the Winter War with Finland began. The small Finnish army fought well and courageously, a fact that even Stalin had to accept; the result was a treaty that gave up pieces of territory to the Soviet Union but for the most part maintained Finnish independence.

Far more ominous and horrible was the situation in Poland. There the Soviet occupation was at least as brutal and murderous—if not more so—than in the parts of Poland subjugated by the Germans. The Russians deported at least one million people—including entire families, without any of their belongings—to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Russian far north, with very few ever seeing their homelands again. In April and May 1940, some 22,000 Polish officers were shot to death near Katyn. More than a million Polish prisoners and workers were deported to Germany for forced labor during the war.

It is telling that many of these practices began soon after the Soviets occupied eastern Poland in September 1939. Some Poles, including Jews, welcomed the Russian soldiers, thinking that they had come to relieve them from the Nazis. (Their subsequent disappointment in the Russians was such that some Jews in eastern Poland thought it better to escape to the Nazi zone, even though they knew how the Germans treated Jews.) Between 1939 and 1941 perhaps the majority of Jewish people in the world lived in Eastern Europe, most of them in eastern Poland, western Russia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia. Their final extermination by the Germans was not decided by Hitler until September 1941 and not put into effect before January 1942: but in many ways their fate had been foreshadowed by the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

On June 14, 1940, the very day the German army marched into Paris, Moscow finally decided to implement the Secret Protocol. Within a day or two it declared the total incorporation of Estonia and Latvia and Lithuania into the Soviet Union. Their governments were imprisoned or exiled. Many of their former officers were executed, and at least 25,000 of the Baltic peoples were deported to the Soviet Union. Hitler transported the German minorities in the Baltics to Germany on German ships.

In November 1940 Molotov traveled to Berlin. His journey was not a success. His diplomatic manner was characteristically stiff. In view of the German conquest of almost all of Europe, he proposed to include Bulgaria in the Russian sphere. The Soviet Union would thus have a presence near the Bosphorus, at the expense of Turkey. The Germans did not respond to this. Sometime in December 1940 Hitler began to plan for an eventual war against Russia.

Stalin was somewhat critical of Molotov's behavior in Berlin; he thought his foreign minister may have been too rigid. This was typical of Stalin during the next six months. He could not and would not believe that Hitler would start a war against him while Germany still had Britain to deal with.

Stalin made some moves to improve Russia's situation. He negotiated a friendly pact with Yugoslavia, which amounted to nothing, since Hitler invaded Yugoslavia on the day of its signing. He invited the Japanese foreign minister, Yōsuke Matsuoka, to visit Moscow on his way back to Japan after his visit to Berlin. Surprisingly,

he then signed a Non-Aggression Pact with Japan. (Soon after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Matsuoka, back in Tokyo, suggested a Japanese invasion of Russia from the east. So much for the value of Non-Aggression Pacts in 1941. But he didn't get his way, since Japan's main enemy was now the US.)

Stalin ordered many friendly gestures toward Germany, including speeding up the deliveries of Soviet products there. He did not in the least react to a warning from Churchill about a prospective German attack against the Soviet Union. During the ten days before the Nazi invasion—all kinds of information about the German threat notwithstanding—Stalin did his best or, rather, his worst, to affirm his faith in Hitler and in Germany. I do not know of a single instance of such abject behavior (for that is what it was) by a statesman of a great power.

The German attack shocked Stalin into silence at first. (Molotov's words after the German declaration of war were also telling: "Did we deserve this?") Stalin's first orders for the Soviet army were not to respond at all. It took him hours after the invasion—until noon—before he ordered the army to resist.

There is still a controversy about how shaken he was during the first days of the Nazi onslaught. Eventually he pulled himself together. On July 3, 1941—eleven days after the German invasion—he addressed the peoples of the Soviet Union as a patriot. By that time some Nazi troops were more than one hundred miles inside the western Soviet Union and advancing toward

Moscow. Roger Moorhouse concludes his modest introduction: the history of the Nazi–Soviet Pact “deserves to be rescued from the footnotes and restored to its rightful place. . . . I can only hope that this book makes some small contribution to that process.” It does.

Of course there still remain questions for historians. One problem is that many of the Soviet archives are still closed, and their texts are often unreliable in any case. A deeper question still unresolved is what Hitler's main purpose was in 1941. His explanation to his people and to his allies was clear and simple. He was never at ease with his alignment with the Soviet Union. He despised communism. But there was another element, probably decisive, in his mind. Here and there he dropped remarks about this to some of his generals. They involved Britain—and, behind it, the United States. Once he had conquered Russia, forcing Stalin to surrender, or to withdraw what remained of Soviet power behind the Urals, to Siberia, what then could Churchill (and Roosevelt) do? They would face a Nazi–Eurasian colossus, with a giant German army that no longer had to fight a war on two fronts.

Stalin's problem was graver but also simpler. As early as September 1941 he wrote to Churchill that the Soviet Union was “in mortal menace.” It did not come about; and by 1942 he recognized that he would gain more from his alliance with Britain and the United States than with Germany. But at least until June 1941 Stalin and Molotov preferred Hitler's Germany to the West.

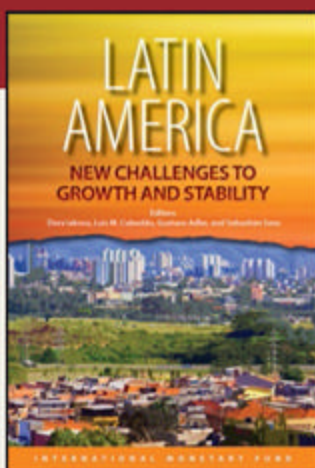
In this respect there is a place for a biography, or biographical sketch, of the sinister Soviet official Vladimir Dekanozov, close to Molotov for a long time, who was one of the prime pro-Germans among high Soviet officials (and in 1941 also ambassador in Berlin). There is some evidence that as late as the spring of 1943 Molotov sent him to Stockholm with the aim of establishing contact with the Nazis. Ribbentrop was ready to meet with Dekanozov but Hitler forbade him to do so. In late 1953, Khrushchev ordered that Dekanozov be executed.

Two historic statements appeared in print well after the war. In December 1941 Churchill sent his foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, to Moscow. The German advance forces had stopped short of Moscow but gunfire could even be heard beyond the Kremlin wall. Stalin said to Eden: “Hitler's problem was that he does not know where to stop.” Eden: “Does anyone?” Stalin: “I do.” Those two words were not entirely devoid of truth. In November 1944 Churchill came to see De Gaulle in Paris. De Gaulle berated the Americans for letting Russia take over all of Eastern Europe. Churchill said, yes, Russia is now a hungry wolf. “But after the meal comes the digestion period.”* Russia would not be able to digest most of Eastern Europe. And so it was to be. □

*It is interesting that this exchange is not recorded in Churchill's war memoirs but in De Gaulle's. Churchill said this well before his “Iron Curtain” speech of 1946.

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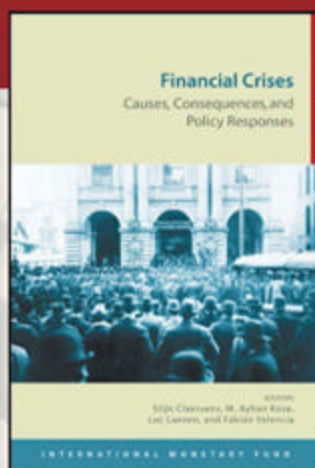
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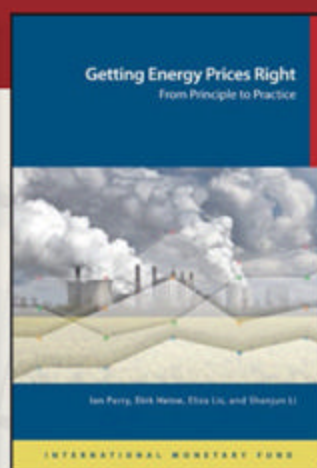
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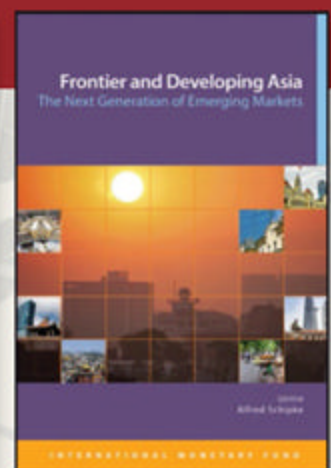
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H Is for Hawk

by Helen Macdonald.
Grove, 300 pp., \$26.00

After her father died in 2007, Helen Macdonald, a historian and naturalist at Cambridge University, began to dream about a goshawk she had encountered several years before. A concerned citizen had found the hawk unconscious—evidently the hawk had flown into a fence and knocked herself out—and had brought her, in a box, to a bird-of-prey center where Macdonald was then working. Macdonald and her coworkers dimmed the lights. They opened the container:

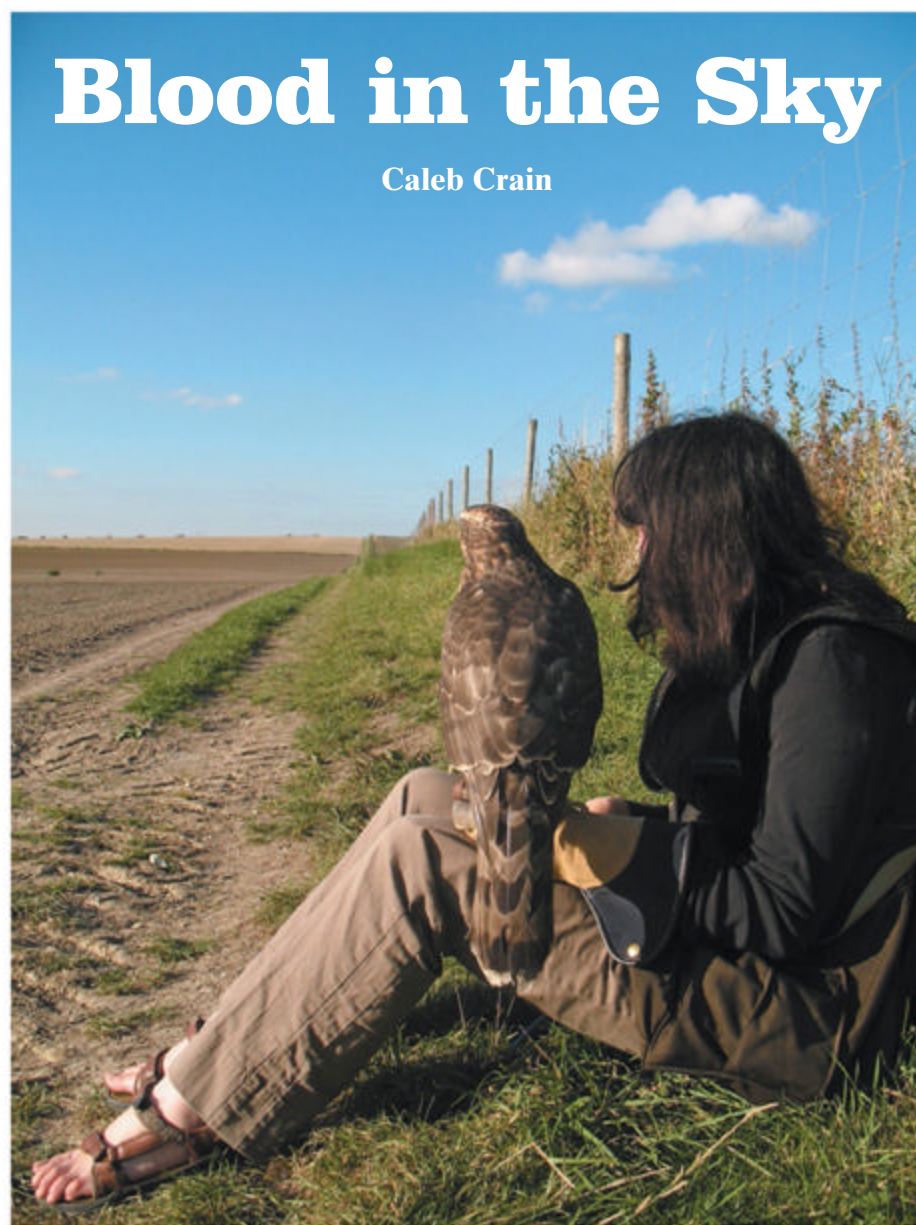
A short scuffle, and then out into the gloom, her grey crest raised and her barred chest feathers puffed up into a meringue of aggression and fear, came a huge old female goshawk. Old because her feet were gnarled and dusty, her eyes a deep, fiery orange, and she was *beautiful*. Beautiful like a granite cliff or a thundercloud.

The prose here is as striking as the bird must have been. Thanks to the word “scuffle,” the reader can hear the rustle of feathers and claws against cardboard. The metaphoric “meringue” nicely captures the fluffy but pointedly erect display of plumage. And the grammar is a conversational, even cavalier mix of sentence fragment (“Beautiful like a granite cliff”) and stately, verb-before-subject declaration (“out into the gloom... came a... goshawk”).

When Macdonald and her peers inspected the bird’s bones, feathers, and talons, they discovered that she was fine—better than fine—and took her outside and released her. “She opened her wings and in a second was gone,” Macdonald writes. “She disappeared over a hedge slant-wise into nothing. It was as if she’d found a rent in the damp Gloucestershire air and slipped through it.”

A vanishing, or a resurrection? This was the moment that Macdonald began to revisit in dreams. Perhaps it served as what Freud called a “nodal point,” linking up her ideas and feelings as she set about the conscious and unconscious work of mourning her father. (Freud thought of mourning as work because he noticed that in a great grief, a mourner only surrenders her attachment to the departed reluctantly and arduously—“bit by bit, under great expense of time and cathectic energy”—through a revisiting and reinterpretation of “each single one of the memories and hopes” that had bound her to the dead.) As if hoping to bring the dream to life, she decided to acquire and train a goshawk. She would come to suspect that the decision was foolhardy because the solitary nature of the project may have made her recovery from grief slower. Her loss is the reader’s gain, however. Her book *H Is for Hawk* is the rich result of her difficult experiment.

How is training a goshawk like mourning a father? Macdonald herself wonders: “What am I going to do with the hawk. Kill things. Make death.” She observes that the words *bereavement* and *raptor* both derive from old words for robbing or seizing, and the observation seems to be a roundabout,



Helen Macdonald with her goshawk, Mabel, near Cambridge, England, 2007

etymological way of saying that both mourner and killer have firsthand knowledge of death’s violence. Indeed, Macdonald revels somewhat in her unsqueamishness, particularly when it comes to her hawk’s food, such as the “sad, fluffy corpses” of day-old chicks that she keeps in her freezer or the “dead white rabbit...defrosting like a soft toy in an evidence bag” on her kitchen counter. At one point her face and scalp were slashed by her hawk, overexcited while on a hunt, and she was covered in her own blood. “*Christ*,” she thinks to herself, with what almost seems to be pride, “*this is a bit Edgar Allan Poe*.”

This is not to say that Macdonald is nonchalant about death or suffering. “Kneeling next to the hawk and her prey,” she writes, “I felt a responsibility so huge that it battered inside my own chest, ballooning out into a space the size of a cathedral.” A hawk’s prey, she notes, lives a life of liberty and pleasure until the moment it’s caught, unlike the animals that humans raise in factory farms.

“Were the rabbits you?” a friend asked Macdonald. A reader may also want to ask, Was the hawk? And which animal, if any, represented her father? Macdonald never quite sorts out her analogies, and that makes sense. Mourning is an untidy process, and in the course of it, as the love and hate that are ordinarily fused in one’s understanding of oneself and others become disarticulated, a survivor may feel more like a killer or like the dead than like the person she previously thought she was. The art of Macdonald’s book is in the way that she weaves together various kinds of falling apart—the way she

loops one unraveling thread of meaning into another.

I’ll limit myself to describing the individual threads in her work. The first is Macdonald’s loss of her father, whom she identifies as a photojournalist and whom a quick Google search reveals to have been Alisdair Macdonald, who worked for decades for the *Daily Mirror*. She doesn’t give her father’s name, perhaps because her claim is not on the accomplishments of his public self but on the gentleness of his private one—on his confession to her, for example, that he kept calm during dangerous assignments by looking at the world through his viewfinder, as if the only thing worth worrying about was the image he was composing. From childhood he was an avid plane-spotter, sometimes logging planes for as long as twelve hours at a time, and Macdonald wonders if her birdwatching is an echo of those days. She remembers fondly a photo that he took of a street-cleaner feeding a crumb to a sparrow.

The second thread is Macdonald’s lifelong fascination with birds of prey. “When I was six,” she recalls, “I tried to sleep every night with my arms folded behind my back like wings.” As a child she devoured books on falconry, and at school, when asked to recite the Lord’s Prayer, she quietly, secretly addressed “Dear Horus,” the falcon-headed god of ancient Egypt, instead of “Our Father.” She was twelve when her first sight of a kill by a trained goshawk left her with “emotions I hadn’t names for.” On the same hunt, she saw three goshawks lose interest in their masters, and she was impressed with the sad patience of the men who dropped out of the hunting party to wait under trees

that their hawks had flown into. Goshawks, it turns out, are easy to lose.

It’s an attribute likely to draw the attention of a mourner. In the 1930s, however, it drew the attention of the British writer T.H. White for reasons that had little to do with mourning. White, whose life story makes up the third strand in Macdonald’s book, was then at a crossroads. He had recently quit schoolteaching, having discovered that, as he put it, “there is something horrible about boys in the mass: like haddocks,” and he was undergoing psychoanalysis in hopes of curing his homosexuality and sadism. He had not yet begun writing *The Once and Future King*, the retelling of the Arthurian legends for which he is best known today.

After reading about a goshawk who “reverted in a week to a feral state,” he decided that he needed such an animal in his life because he wanted to go feral himself. This wasn’t terribly logical.

Why would taming a goshawk make the tamer wild? Nor was this the only flaw in his thinking. A hawk, as Macdonald explains, is not a social animal and is incapable of understanding punishment. The sadist in White seems to have taken this as a challenge, and in a three-century-old book on falconry, he discovered a form of negative reinforcement that a hawk would accept: sleep deprivation. White called it a “secret cruelty”—secret because the bird didn’t perceive it as cruelty—and he subjected his goshawk to it for days on end. He also subjected himself to it, working alone even though, as Macdonald notes, his seventeenth-century guru was almost certainly spelled by a team of helpers. Macdonald thinks his misunderstanding was willful—that he wanted his encounter with the bird to be a kind of chivalric contest. “It has never been easy to learn life from books” was White’s rueful admission in *The Goshawk* (1951), his funny, poignant, and excruciating account of the ordeal.

At age eight, when Macdonald first read White’s *Goshawk*, she was fascinated and disapproving: “This was a book about falconry by a man who seemed to know nothing about it.” (White himself confessed that it was “the kind of book which would madden every accomplished falconer.”) When she reread it as an adult, four months after her father’s death, she again felt somewhat embarrassed by and annoyed at White’s blundering, but she was also able to admire the courage and honesty intertwined with it. What’s more, she realized that she had partly borrowed her motives for adopting a goshawk from White; she had come to share what she described as “his desire to escape to the wild.”

Her attempted escape, through her relationship with a goshawk, constitutes the fourth storyline in her book. Macdonald gives her bird the very human name of Mabel, on account of the name’s connotations of “antimacassars and afternoon teas,” but she does so rather perversely, because it’s the strangeness of the hawk that she most admires. “She is a conjuring trick,” Macdonald writes, of her first sight of the animal. “A reptile. A fallen angel.” Macdonald is so unwilling to risk boring her reader that from time to time one feels that the color saturation dial on her prose is turned up a

Christina McLeish

little too high (of the eating of a messy hamburger, for example, she writes that “ketchup dripped down my arm like a wound”). Given the opportunity to observe Mabel up close, however, Macdonald proves herself capable not only of bold metaphors but also of quiet impressions that can be almost painfully precise:

The feathers down her front are the colour of sunned newsprint, of tea-stained paper, and each is marked darkly towards its tip with a leaf-bladed spearhead, so from her throat to her feet she is patterned with a shower of falling raindrops.... She looks new. Looks as if the world cannot touch her.

As Macdonald journeys into the underworld, or rather, otherworld, of the nonhuman, White serves as her Virgil, and her steps follow in his footprints. “The basket pulsed like a big heart in fever,” White wrote of the arrival of his goshawk. Macdonald describes the arrival of hers, in a box, with an image just as striking: “A sudden *thump* of feathered shoulders and the box shook as if someone had punched it, hard, from within.” When White began to train his bird, he boasted that as an unemployed person he was himself as “free as a hawk,” and Macdonald similarly brags of cutting herself off from society when she starts Mabel’s training: “I’d instructed my friends to leave me alone,” she writes. “I’d filled the freezer with hawk food and unplugged the phone.” A few weeks into his training, White disconcerted a postman who stopped for a chat by unconsciously mewing at him during their conversation. At a comparable moment, Macdonald found speaking to a friend effortful, and when she did speak, she sensed that “the voice is not entirely mine.”

Much of the charm of Macdonald’s book, like White’s, is that the affable author that the reader meets in its pages contrasts so sharply with the antisocial author that the pages describe. So fierce did Macdonald’s desire to shun people become that at one point, in her training log, she wrote of her fellow humans that she wished “they would FUCK OFF AND LEAVE ME ALONE.” She preferred to be a hawk: “solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life.”

One can see the appeal. In their superior strength, agility, and focus, animals must be the original supermen. Macdonald reports that the eyes of birds have four color receptors where human eyes have only three, and that hawks can see polarized light and thermals, and can sense magnetic fields. And who wouldn’t like to be able to fly? As any contemporary 3-D superhero movie will confirm, we humans, when we dream of flying, don’t imagine doing it the way sparrows do. We imagine flying like hawks, as in this description, in J.A. Baker’s lush and disquieting 1967 book *The Peregrine*, of a falcon’s stoop:

She swept down and round in a spiral, wings half bent back, glancing down through the air, smoothly and without haste, at a forty-five degree angle. In this first long curving fall she slowly revolved her

body on its axis, and just as the full turn was completed, she tilted over in a perfect arc and poured into the vertical descent. There was a slight check, as though some tenuous barrier of unruly air had been forced through; then she dropped smoothly down. Her wings were now flung up and back and bending inwards, quivering like fins in the gale that rushed along her tapering sides. They were like the flights of an arrow, rippling and pluming above the rigid shaft. She hurled to earth; dashed herself down; disappeared.

A minute later she rose unharmed....

The end of a goshawk’s training is the release of her, for hunting. The ques-



Macdonald’s goshawk, Mabel

Christina McLeish

tion is whether she will come back. Up until she is loosed, the bond between human and bird is a literal one, with its own special vocabulary. The leather straps that attach to a hawk’s anklets, for example, are known as jesses, and the long training leash that attaches to the jesses is known as a creance. The literal bonds come to have figurative meanings. “One never tied a knot without the anxiety of a turnkey and a faint dubiety at heart,” White recalled. When Macdonald came across a sketch that she drew at age six of a kestrel on a glove, she noticed that her younger self had drawn the bird and the glove vaguely but had taken great care in detailing the legs, toes, jesses, and leash. Her focus went naturally to the parts that connected hawk and human.

In describing what might attach an unleashed hawk, Macdonald names “lines of habit, of hunger, of partnership, of familiarity.” She adds to her list “something the old falconers would call love,” and if she herself hesitates to call it love outright, perhaps it’s because she’s aware how different the attachment is from human love, or from the common ideal of it, at any rate. Humans associate love with generosity, which hawks don’t respond well to. Generosity was White’s big mistake. Afraid that his goshawk was malnourished, White fed him too much. He didn’t know that modern falconers weigh their birds frequently in order to feed them judiciously. “A fat, stuffed goshawk doesn’t want anything other than to be left alone, to disappear into that half-world of no-humans, replete and contented,” Macdonald explains.

“I had thought...that the way to the heart lay through the belly,” White wrote, after it was too late. In fact, “the way to government lay through the deprivation of the belly.”

Despite knowing better—despite having known better since childhood—Macdonald made the same mistake with Mabel. Repeatedly she let Mabel go when Mabel wasn’t yet hungry enough, and the hawk, freed, ignored her. Macdonald even misinterpreted her error the same way White did, imagining that Mabel was having a complex emotional response when in fact she was only manifesting the indifference of satiety.

Knowing better, it seems, was of limited use. Maybe when a human feeds a small creature reliably and pays careful, sustained attention to it, such mistakes are inevitable. “After a course of falconry,” White suggested, “any man would make a good mother.” To a partridge, White’s goshawk was an assassin, and usually looked the part, but White had a chance to see the assassin taking his first bath, and turning “funny and silly” in his enjoyment of it: “The absurd princeling blew out all his feathers, lifted his tail in the air, and, like an old lady sitting down in a tram or lifting her bustle to get at a purse among the petticoats, sat down suddenly, shiftily, luxuriously, in the puddle.” Macdonald made a similar discovery one day when she crumpled up a piece of paper into a ball. Mabel, it transpired, liked to play catch. “No one had ever told me goshawks played,” she writes. “It was not in the books.”

Playing with Mabel seems to have helped Macdonald with something. It seems to have been important to her, in her mourning, to come to some kind of peace with brutality. When Mabel killed her first pheasant and began to pluck and eat it, Macdonald began to weep. “She is a child,” she writes, describing what she felt in that moment. “A baby hawk that’s just worked out who she is. What she’s for.” While helping Mabel pull feathers off her kill, Macdonald recalled the patience that her father had shown her when she was a little girl. It’s a complex scene—a gory Madonna and Child, where the Madonna is making an identification with her own father, and seeing her father as having been tolerant of her own rapacity as a child.

Toward the end of the book, however, Macdonald insists that the inhumanity of goshawks is a thing apart, not to be confused with the meanings that humans assign to them. At first I understood this to be a disavowal, and maybe even a piece of sentimentality, and was a little impatient with it. But on second thought, it seems to me that Macdonald is distinguishing playing from reality in order to protect her right to play even with cruelty and death. In training a goshawk, Macdonald didn’t become her father. Nor did she become a hawk. She kept her own human self, and perhaps deepened it.

Soon after helping Mabel pluck her first kill, Macdonald assumed the responsibility of making sure that any rabbits that Mabel caught were dead before she progressed too far into the eating of them. “I had to check the rabbit was dead by very gently touching its eye,” she writes. What’s lovely about Macdonald’s book is the clarity with which she sees both the inner and outer worlds that she lives in.

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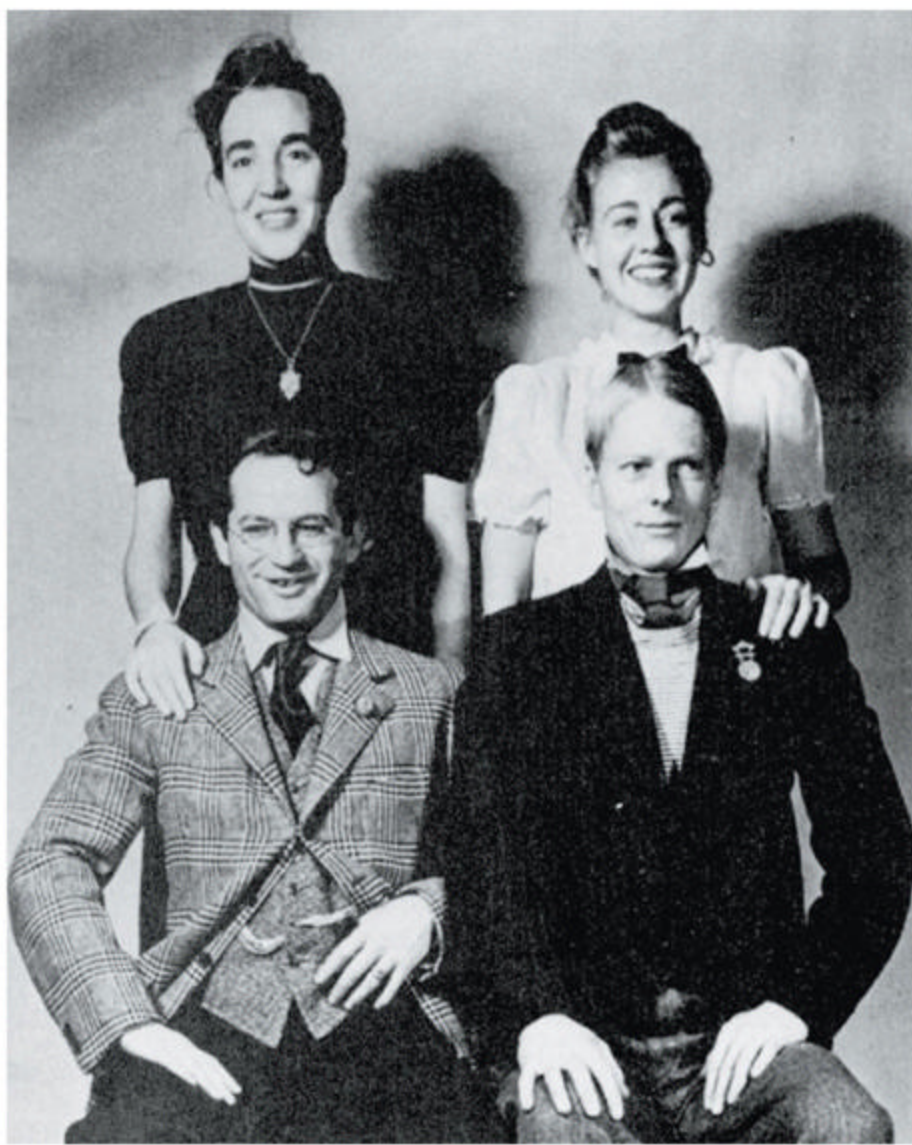
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with an introduction by Joshua Ferris.
Liveright, 1,279 pp., \$39.95

When Henry Roth's debut novel, *Call It Sleep*, was published in 1934, critics judged it second as a work of fiction, and first as a work of anthropology. An autobiographical account of immigrant Jewish life on the Lower East Side, the book was praised in the *New York Herald Tribune* as "the most accurate and profound study of an American slum childhood that has yet appeared"; the *New York Times* reviewer wrote that it "has done for the East Side what James T. Farrell is doing for the Chicago Irish." *The New Masses*, a Marxist journal, debated whether the novel was sufficiently revolutionary. This arid political criticism might have contributed to killing it off, for the novel was out of print by 1936.

When it was republished as an Avon paperback in 1964, it was the mysterious fate of the author, who at that point had never completed another novel, that captured the public imagination. Championing *Call It Sleep* on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, Irving Howe led with a discussion of the novel's precarious "underground existence" and "vague rumors" that Roth had become a "duck farmer in Maine." Within the week *Call It Sleep* had sold more than ten times the number of copies it had sold in the previous three decades, on its way to selling more than a million copies. This came as a shock to Roth, who, after stints as a psychiatric hospital orderly, precision tool grinder, English teacher, and maple syrup vendor, was in fact a waterfowl farmer in Montville, Maine.

Roth's legend grew with profiles, to which he reluctantly submitted, in national magazines that, as his biographer Steven Kellman put it, "contributed to the myth of Henry Roth as the Rip Van Winkle of American literature."* Roth did not awake from his long professional slumber until 1994, with the publication of *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park*, his first novel in sixty years and the beginning of a four-volume saga called *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, which has now been published for the first time in a monstrous volume of 1,279 pages, nearly twenty years after his death in 1995.

The book comes with endorsements comparing Roth to Balzac (from Cynthia Ozick), Nathanael West (Harold Bloom), and Philip Roth (Bloom again, as well as Joshua Ferris, in his introduction to the edition). Roth bears resemblances to these writers, to be certain: he shares Philip Roth's agonized sense of humor, Balzac's interest in sociological detail, and West's fascination with the grotesque. But the publication of the complete *Mercy of a Rude Stream* is an opportunity to appreciate how sublimely strange Roth's masterpiece



Muriel Parker Roth and Henry Roth (left) with Muriel's sister Elizabeth Parker Mills and brother-in-law John Mills IV (right), shortly after the Roths' marriage. In 1939, the Millses invited the Roths to move into their penthouse apartment with them on East 23rd Street.

is. It is not remotely like anything else in American literature.

Even though Roth had repeatedly renounced *Call It Sleep* ("The man who wrote that book at the age of twenty-seven is dead," he told interviewers), *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park* continues where the previous novel left off—in the summer of 1914, with Roth's eight-year-old hero moving with his family from the Lower East Side to Jewish Harlem. Roth's alter ego, David Schearl in *Call It Sleep*, has been renamed Ira Stigman, but like Schearl he is an only child, Galicia-born. His parents, Genya and Albert, have become Leah and Chaim, which happen to be the names of Roth's own parents. ("Genya," oddly, is the name given to one of Leah's sisters, whom we learn will later be killed in a concentration camp.) Ira's parents are not identical to their predecessors; they are more complex, richer. Chaim, like Albert, is a milkman, though he is not nearly as cruel, possessing a self-deprecatory streak that humanizes him; Leah, while as excessively devoted to her son as Genya, is less beatific and a stronger adversary to her husband.

Though six decades have passed between novels, readers will find the same cold-water flat with the same green oilcloth-covered table, the same arguments about money, the same florid Yiddish imprecations. Several episodes are repeated nearly intact, including

the attempted seduction of the narrator's mother while she is left alone with her son (in *Call It Sleep*, the suitor is Albert's coworker; in *Mercy*, he is Leah's adult nephew). The novel also borrows a striking linguistic inversion from *Call It Sleep*: when the immigrant parents use Yiddish, their speech is articulate, sophisticated, even poetic, while their English is broken and addled, full of solecisms. They possess a dignity that their destitute, overcrowded apartments, which they share with legions of brazen vermin, cannot entirely diminish.

Stylistically, however, the tetralogy is the work of a different writer. In *Call It Sleep*, David Schearl is trying to make sense of a new world—the new world—that is baffling, dangerous, and chaotic. It is "a fable," as Roth later put it, "of discontinuity." *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, on the other hand, is compulsively continuous. No memory goes unrecorded. The approach is more than nostalgic; it is custodial. We are in the mind of a dying man struggling to remember every possible detail about his childhood, before they all follow him into oblivion.

For most of the first volume, the story advances creakily, haltingly. Sections are introduced like journal entries: "It was a February day, the first week in February, 1918." "Once again it was summer, the early summer of 1919." "And finally came 1920..." During

these years Ira meets a series of charismatic boys to whom he attaches himself in the hope of escaping the loneliness of his solitary home life, and there are occasional scenes of intense emotion: Ira is molested by two different men, a stranger and a teacher; an uncle comes home from war and, in his anxiety, bites into a drinking glass; Ira steals an expensive pen from another student, lies about it, and is expelled.

But these dramatic interludes sneak up on the unprepared reader, who is lulled into submission by descriptions of every teacher, every class, every report card ("He was promoted, with B B B on his report card"). Often Roth seems to cast around, free-associatively, as if brainstorming, for details he might have forgotten. The memories have anthropological interest, but no clear significance to the novel:

If you went to the movies, alone and on Saturday, it was better to go there with three cents, and wait outside for a partner with two cents....

A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris aims for comprehensiveness—and yet something is missing. It feels as if Roth is stalling for time. As we will learn in the next volume, he is. Something is missing, all right.

The first volume is redeemed by images of crystalline beauty—"rowboats floating on spangles of water" in Central Park, steel-shod horses "suddenly skating in mid-stride" on the "long, icy ribbons" of frozen avenues—and Roth's own awareness of his narrative's shortcomings. This self-lacerating commentary is introduced through the first of *Mercy's* two major narrative innovations: a second narrative, set some seventy years later, in which Ira is an elderly man. Appearing at irregular intervals and rendered in a different typeface, these passages are initially unwelcome disruptions, especially as the story struggles to gain momentum. Even Roth agrees: "If only there weren't so many interruptions," he carps, "so many distractions."

These interruptions are difficult to characterize: some appear in the first person, some in the second, some in the third. Many are dialogues between Ira and his computer, whom he addresses, with self-conscious pretension, as Ecclesias. They range from a sentence or two to digressions that go on for a dozen pages. Some take place in 1979, the year that Roth (and Ira) began writing the novel; others take place as many as fifteen years later when, near death, he is making his final revisions.

We learn gradually, in bits and pieces of allusive, evasive prose, that Ira has a wife, M., whom he loves deeply and gratefully; that he now lives in a trailer park in New Mexico; that he is the author of a single novel, published in 1934; and that his "extraordinary hiatus of production... was the dominant feature of his literary career." At several points in the first volume he refers, vaguely, to an "omission" in the narrative, but we never know whether this is important or merely another digression.

*Steven G. Kellman, *Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth* (Norton, 2005), p. 232; reviewed in these pages by Daniel Mendelsohn, December 15, 2005.

The interruptions assume greater significance as we realize that the novel's central drama lies not in the misadventures of young Ira, but in old Ira's effort to turn his life into literature. A tension develops between the Ecclesiastes sections and the main story, as the older Ira grows frustrated with the limitations of his style—even before the reader does. Fifty pages in comes the admission that the stories from his youth

should have gone into a novel, several novels perhaps, written in early manhood, after his first—and only—work of fiction. There should have followed novels written in the maturity gained by that first novel.

—Well, salvage whatever you can, threadbare mementos glimmering in recollection.

What begins as a young man's coming-of-age novel turns out to be an old man's coming-to-sober-terms-with-death novel. Why, Ira wonders, this compulsion to write everything down? Is it really, as he tells Ecclesiastes at one point, “to make dying easier”? Or is it to understand something crucial about his identity? He believes that his family's decision to leave “the Orthodox ministate of the East Side” for Harlem led to an irreversible “attrition of his identity.” The question of identity, he decides, is inseparable from his Jewishness. As a child he hated being a Jew, felt imprisoned in Jewishness, and as an adult he has responded by becoming a devoted atheist (“Marxist-Socialist atheism offers the only salvation”). But the act of writing about his youth forces him to realize that his Jewishness is the source of his creative impulse. “When he tried to pluck it out,” he writes, “creative inanition followed.” So perhaps the meticulous exhumation of his past is actually an attempt to understand what drives him—and us all—to create works of art.

Or perhaps this is all a cover. Perhaps something else is going on.

Something else is going on.

What it is, exactly, is revealed 122 pages into the second volume, *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*. Until this point we have continued to coast along the contrails of Ira's memory: expulsion from Stuyvesant High School, a series of menial jobs—office boy at a law firm, clerk at a toy company, a soda pop vendor at the Polo Grounds—transfer to DeWitt Clinton High School, and an encounter with a young black prostitute. In the Ecclesiastes sections, we've learned that excerpts from *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park* have been refused for publication by “various and sundry well-thought-of periodicals,” a rejection that he concedes is deserved:

His stuff was now old hat...wandering and wanting, and perhaps pathetic. Be better, more dignified, if he shut up, maintained an air of remote reserve, because that way his deficiencies would remain unexposed. Good idea.

Then, shortly after a summation of his junior year report card (“A, A, A, every quiz, every test”), with Ira lying

in his bed on a Sunday morning while his mother goes shopping, we encounter two nonsensical words of dialogue: “Minnie. Okay?”

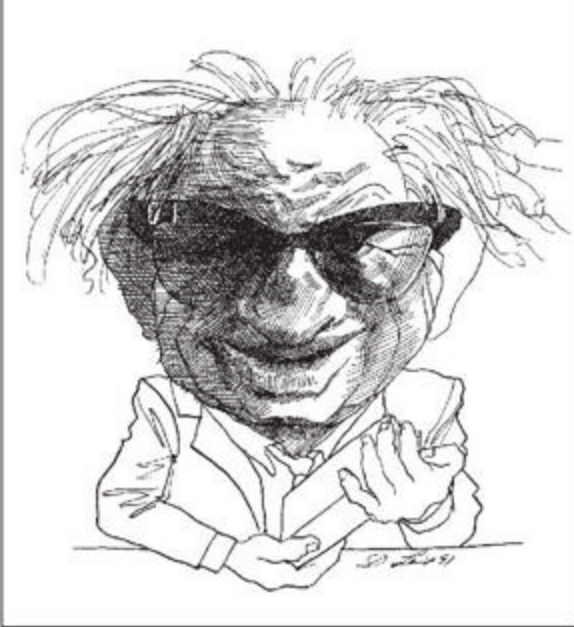
There has not been any previous mention of a Minnie, so why a woman named Minnie should be inside the Stigman's small apartment is baffling. Not as baffling, however, as what follows:

She said all kinds of dirty words at first; where did she learn them? After he showed her how different it was, “Fuck me, fuck me good!” He wished she wouldn't, though he liked it.

There follows a page of hard-core raunch. This is the least of it:

She slid out of her folding cot, and into Mom and Pop's double bed

Henry Roth



beside it; while he dug for the little tin of Trojans in his pants pocket, little aluminum pod at two for a quarter. And then she watched him, strict and serious, her face on the fat pillow, her hazel eyes, myopic and close together—like Pop's—watched him roll a condom on his hard-on.... “Fuck me like a hoor. No, no kisses. I don't want no kisses. Just fuck me good.”

In case there was any doubt, that second reference to “Pop” seals it. Minnie is Ira's kid sister. As we later learn, they've been having sexual relations for four years, since Minnie was ten. But this information isn't revealed at once, so we're left to wonder if somehow, in 389 pages of anatomical description of every object in the cold-water apartment—every tablecloth and bathroom fixture and family portrait hanging on the wall—and of every activity Ira has experienced between the years of eight and sixteen, we might have missed the fact that Ira has a sister, and is regularly having sex with her. It is one of the most deranged moments in American fiction.

It also turns everything that's come before it into a lie—including, if we are to read it as a work of memoir, *Call It Sleep*. David Schearl, like Ira Stigman, is an only child. The closest Roth comes in the earlier novel to revealing his secret is a scene in which a friend's sister drags Schearl into a closet and gropes him. “I managed to evade [it] in the only novel I ever wrote: coming to grips with it,” says old Ira, in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. “You made a cli-

max of evasion,” replies Ecclesiastes, “an apocalyptic tour de force at the price of renouncing a literary future. As pyrotechnics, it was commendable.” But pyrotechnics and nothing more. The evasion in his first novel, Ira believes, was responsible for his writing block.

We also realize that, in the earlier parts of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, what seemed a compulsion to disclose every detail of his youth was in fact a compulsion to erase every trace of his sister. It's the liar's first pantomime: tell everything, show nothing. Roth, it turns out, is not a laborious chronicler of lost time, but a trickster. Minnie's sudden appearance forces us to question everything. For instance: Was Ira really so lonely after all? Doesn't seem like it! Is he telling this story in order to come to terms with death, or with his own original sin? Might the “attrition of his identity,” his profound sense of alienation, relate not to Manhattan geography but to shuffling his sister and keeping it a secret for seventy years?

When volume two was published in 1995, Roth told interviewers that the incest, like most everything else in the novel, was drawn from actual experience. (His sister Rose, still alive at the time, issued a denial and threatened to sue his publisher; she settled with her brother for \$10,000.) For literary critics incest replaced the “extraordinary hiatus” as the dominant feature of Roth's literary career. But because the two final volumes were not yet published, it was impossible to see how the revelation transformed the substance of the novel itself. It was not appreciated that Minnie appears at the one-third mark of his story—the end, in conventional drama, of the first act.

After the revelation, it is as if the novel begins anew. Though we remain at the mercy of the chronological stream, the prose is livelier, the Ecclesiastes sections crackle with equal parts self-loathing and elation, and, for the first time, the story possesses momentum and suspense. Roth is liberated by his disclosure, free at last to move beyond childhood and into the thornier questions that arise with sexual maturity—particularly Ira's sexual maturity. “I must admit that I come to life,” he writes, “when in the grip of the sexual escapade.” It is true that after nearly four hundred pages of chores, games with neighborhood children, and report cards, the incest scenes are a lively addition.

But the rest of the narrative is livelier too. His incestuous relationship, like “a dark binary star on a visible one,” has “altered the entire universe” of the novel. A life is now at stake. Ira is a man with a horrific secret, which is “the determining force in Ira's thoughts and behavior.” It influences every decision he makes—from his choice of college to his desire to become a novelist. We need Ecclesiastes now, to serve as a guide through the tenebrous, overgrown forest of Ira's mind.

Buried in the second volume, not long before Minnie's appearance, is a short anecdote about Ira's discovery of Wagner's “Prize Song,” from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. It mystifies him when he hears it on a friend's pho-

nograph one aimless afternoon. After playing the song repeatedly, “with a tenacity born of sheer anomie,” what he originally perceived as cacophony becomes

deliberately ordered sounds, not just ordinary harmony, but unique sounds and cadences that once comprehended became inevitable.... So that's what they meant by great music. After a while the music went through your head. It was a different kind of tune, altogether different at first, but it slowly became familiar, and when it became familiar, it sang—in its own way, and yet it was right.

That is exactly what it's like to read *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

It is one of the perverse satisfactions of the novel that Ira, despite his deep feelings of shame, writes shamelessly about the thrill of incest. It is a “glorious abomination,” “the jackpot of the transcendental abominable”:

Better, more obsessively sought after, for being a sin, an abomination! Boy, that fierce furor, with her alternately foul and tender outcries of the essence of wickedness.... He wouldn't miss it, exchange it, for anything else in the world.

Even years later, long after they have concluded their affair, he admits desiring Minnie still. Yet Ira is painfully aware of how his desire cripples him, warps him, stunts his growth, and turns him inward. He is immured by his sexual appetite, “appetite always morticed to fear and self-reproach.” His life shrinks to the size of his incestuous compulsion. His sin infantilizes him, keeps him in a perpetual tawdry adolescence. He feels that he's been ruined for adult relationships, and adult responsibilities. And like any obsessive, he can't stop. Not long after Ira and Minnie finish their affair, he starts a new one with Stella, his pudgy fourteen-year-old cousin.

Ira can only observe the world of adults from the outside, like a spy. He gets an opportunity to do so in the final two volumes—*From Bondage* and *Requiem for Harlem*—when his best friend, Larry Gordon, begins an affair with Edith Welles, a pretty adjunct English professor at Columbia. Larry, like so many of the boys Ira has befriended, is everything Ira wants to be, and isn't: wealthy, handsome, articulate, culturally savvy, supported by a loving family that is generations removed from the shtetl, so assimilated that the fact of their being Jewish comes as a shock to Ira. Edith hopes to mold Larry, who has bohemian aspirations, into a poet. But Larry cannot produce lines. In his frustration he turns to sculpture, but he fails here too.

While Larry despairs, Ira, his clumsy sidekick, wins a story competition at CUNY, and Edith begins to shift her allegiance. As Edith and Ira draw closer together, he confesses his dark secret; to his surprise, Edith does not reject him, but sympathizes with him. She encourages him to liberate himself from the bondage of his compulsive depravity through literature. Returning from a trip to Europe she gives him a

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contraband copy of *Ulysses*, and in James Joyce's novel, and later in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, Ira glimpses his future. Literature, he decides, can offer him "a way of buffering, of screening out, reality." Through fiction he can rewrite his past. He can erase his sin. He can erase his sister. And his fourteen-year-old cousin, while he's at it.

In the Ecclesiastes sections, meanwhile, old Ira refines his personal theory of literature. Characteristically it is full of contradictions. Some 750 pages into the novel he is still questioning himself, his narrative strategy, and the self-imposed exile that has swallowed up his career. Even as, in the main narrative, young Ira is discovering Joyce for the first time, in the second narrative old Ira is renouncing Joyce for abandoning his folk and abstracting their struggles into a narcissistic aesthetic exercise. Ira credits the richness of his immigrant childhood with inspiring him to create, in his first novel, "a fable that addressed a universal experience, a universal disquiet" that reverberated so deeply with readers. Yet at the same time he argues that his failure, and the failure of so many writers of his generation, lay in an inability to mature—"to align themselves with the future."

Ira's (or Roth's) motivations for undertaking such an ambitious and peculiar novel as *Mercy of a Rude Stream* are just as conflicted. He claims, variously, that he is writing in order to "transmogrify the baseness of his days and ways into precious literature... [to] free him[self] from this depraved exile"; simply for the love of "creating something worthwhile"; to "help others avoid the pitfalls he had been prone to"; to impose order on his chaotic inner life; to celebrate his life's disorderliness; "to ward off time"; "to make dying easier, more welcome, for myself and my fellow man"; and to tell future generations "what it was to be alive" in Harlem at the turn of the century. There's nothing unusual about having more than one reason to write a novel, or to undertake a literary career. What is unusual is the author's profound sense of turmoil as he struggles to organize his own thoughts. He is tortured by the way "contradictions within the self made you feel, as if you had lost all your substance, were hollow." But he also realizes that "acknowledging his own contrarities reunited him within himself."

It is this pitiless examination of a writer grappling with his demons, at the highest reaches of his intellectual capacity, that gives *Mercy of a Rude Stream* its ferocious passion. This kind of self-questioning approach, as many other readers of Roth have pointed out, is as old as the Talmud, which he quotes in the epigraph of the novel's final volume:

*Without Haste, Without Rest.
Not thine the labour to complete,
And yet thou art not free to cease!*

Really no other justification is needed. Ira writes despite his inadequacies and self-doubt, despite the fact that he doesn't expect to finish the novel, or even for it to be read. There is folly in this, but also heroism. *Mercy of a Rude Stream* asks absolute questions and fails to answer them, as all powerful literature must do. If the novel is overlong and overstuffed, its prodigality is justified—it is an expression of the exhilaration felt by a man who has cast off six decades of self-repression and finally feels himself free. □

WHAT BREAKS FIRST

As the iceberg shears off the submarine periscope, the noise is less groan, more wild animal shriek. "Trust me," said the captain

piloting toward gunfire to see what the Russians are up to these days. The sea ice resembles a cracked white lung steadily swelling

then sinking as high tide fades away. Already birds and barnacles and butterflies are shifting their habitats poleward,

the eelgrass and jellyfish will be fine, but the basements of coastal cities will begin to flood, an inch at a time.

The polar bear at the zoo makes the child start to cry: why doesn't he move? Animals who cannot acclimate

to shifting conditions engender scientific argument over what breaks first: the heart or the brain. In the heart

of the Arctic, underwater microphones listen for enemy traffic. The noise made by a million barnacle larvae swimming north

is less hiss or whisper, more betrayed stare. When rations ran low, polar explorers ate one less biscuit. When biscuits ran out,

the horses were first to be shot. In another sixty thousand years the mouth of the Beardmore Glacier will spit out their bones.

—Jynne Dilling Martin

Did We Lose the War on Poverty?—II

Christopher Jencks

Legacies of the War on Poverty

edited by Martha J. Bailey
and Sheldon Danziger.
Russell Sage, 309 pp., \$39.95 (paper)

Although an accurate estimate of how the poverty rate has changed since 1964 would show that we are much closer to achieving President Lyndon Johnson's original goal of eliminating poverty than most readers of this journal probably believe, it would not tell us how effective specific antipoverty programs have been. The poverty rate could have declined despite the War on Poverty, not because of it. Assessing specific strategies for reducing poverty is the main task that Martha Bailey and Sheldon Danziger take on in *Legacies of the War on Poverty*.

When Johnson initiated the War on Poverty, he reportedly said that its political success depended on avoiding handouts. The initial focus was therefore on equalizing opportunity by helping poor children acquire the skills they would need to get steady jobs with at least average pay. I will discuss three of these programs: Head Start for poor preschoolers, Title I funding for public schools with high concentrations of poor children, and financial aid for low-income college students (now known as Pell Grants).

Any program aimed at young people, no matter how successful, inevitably takes a long time to change the poverty rate. Johnson knew that the War on Poverty's political survival was also likely to require programs that produced more immediate results, so despite his worries about "handouts" he began looking for ways to cut the poverty rate by improving the "safety net" for the poor. I will discuss two of these programs: the big increase in Social Security benefits for the elderly and food stamps.

1.

Head Start

Head Start was primarily a program in which children attended preschool for a year or two, before they went to kindergarten. The Perry Preschool, which opened in the early 1960s in Ypsilanti, Michigan, is probably the most famous preschool in American history. It was a true experiment, selecting its pupils randomly from a pool of poor black three-year-olds and following both those admitted to Perry (the "treatment" group) and those not admitted (the "control" group) for many years.

After two years in the Perry program its graduates did much better on IQ and vocabulary tests than the control group, making Perry an important inspiration for Head Start. As time passed, however, the test score gap between Perry's treatment and control groups shrank. Eventually the treatment group's advantage was so small that it could have arisen by chance.

Almost every evaluation of Head Start has also found this same pattern. Children who spend a year in Head Start make more academic progress during that year than similar children who are not enrolled in preschool. Al-

most every follow-up has also found that once children enter kindergarten or first grade the Head Start graduates' test score advantage shrinks, and over time it often disappears. For many years people who paid attention to this research (including me) interpreted it as showing that Head Start doesn't work.

Nonetheless, Head Start's reputation remained high among parents, and the program survived. Over the past decade its reputation has also risen dramatically among those who keep abreast of new research, largely because longer-term follow-ups have

points more likely to enter college than those who did not attend Head Start. Among black siblings, Head Start had little effect on high school graduation or college attendance, but blacks who had been in Head Start were 12 percentage points less likely to have been arrested and charged with a crime than those who had not been in Head Start.

In 2009 David Deming reported a similar study of siblings born between 1980 and 1986. Again the Head Start graduates' test score advantage shrank as they got older, but those who had attended Head Start were less likely to



Shadows of residents of a housing project in Red Hook, Brooklyn, 2011; photograph by Jared Wellington, a twelve-year-old workshop participant, from Project Lives: New York Public Housing Residents Photograph Their World. Edited by George Carrano, Chelsea Davis, and Jonathan Fisher, it has just been published by PowerHouse Books.

allowed evaluators to take a broader view of what differentiates a "good" school from a "bad" school. A follow-up of Perry Preschool children at age twenty-seven found more than three decades ago that the treatment group was significantly less likely than the control group to have been arrested for either a serious or not-so-serious crime. In addition, boys had significantly higher monthly incomes and were significantly less likely to smoke, while girls were significantly less likely to have been put into special education or to have used drugs.¹

In the chapter on Head Start in *Legacies*, Chloe Gibbs, Jens Ludwig, and Douglas Miller also summarize several recent studies of its long-term impact. In 2002 Eliana Garces, Duncan Thomas, and Janet Currie reported a comparison of siblings born between 1965 and 1977, one of whom had been in Head Start and one of whom had not. Just as in Perry, test score differences between the Head Start children and the control group declined with age. But when they compared white siblings, those who attended Head Start were 22 percentage points more likely to finish high school and 19 percentage

have been diagnosed with a learning disability, less likely to have been held back a year in school, more likely to have graduated from high school, and more likely to report being in good health than their siblings who had not been in preschool.

These studies do not tell us *why* Head Start graduates fare better in adolescence and early adulthood. One popular theory is that Head Start helps children develop character traits like self-control and foresight that were not measured in early follow-ups but persist for a long time.² Schools spend hundreds of hours teaching math and reading every year, so the advantage enjoyed by a sibling who attended Head Start becomes a smaller fraction of their total experience the longer they have been in school. In contrast, once traits like self-control and foresight are acquired, they may be more likely to persist and strengthen over time as their benefits become more obvious. Such theories are speculative, however.

Although the Head Start story still contains puzzles, it certainly suggests that holding elementary and middle schools accountable only for their students' reading and math scores, as the Bush and Obama administrations have tried to do since 2001, misses much of what matters most for children's fu-

¹The best analysis of these effects appears in a recent paper by James Heckman, Rodrigo Pinto, and Peter Savelyev, "Understanding the Mechanisms Through Which an Influential Early Childhood Program Boosted Adult Outcomes," *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 103, No. 6 (October 2013).

²See the paper by Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev cited in footnote 1 for some evidence on this.

tures. The Head Start story also suggests that figuring out what works can take a long time. This is a serious problem in a nation with a two-year electoral cycle and a twenty-second attention span. Had parents not embraced Head Start, we might well have abolished it before we discovered that, in important ways, it worked.

Title I

Supplementary federal funding for schools with high concentrations of poor students has been administered in a way that makes conclusive judgments about its impact on children very difficult. The chapter of *Legacies* by Elizabeth Cascio and Sarah Reber suggests that the federal payments to poor schools under Title I helped reduce spending disparities between rich and poor school districts in the 1960s and 1970s, but not after 1990. Nor does Title I seem to have reduced expenditure differences between schools serving rich and poor children in the same district. Finally there is no solid evidence that Title I reduced differences between rich and poor school districts on reading or math tests. If there was any such impact, it was small.

Title I did, however, give the federal government more leverage when it wanted to force southern school districts to desegregate in the 1970s. Threats to withhold Title I funding induced many recalcitrant southern school districts to start mixing black and white children. School desegregation in the South appears to have been linked to gains in black students' academic achievement. Title I also gave Washington more leverage over the states in 2001, when the Bush administration and Congress wanted to make every state hold its public schools accountable for raising reading and math scores. How well that worked remains controversial.

Financial Aid for College Students

The War on Poverty led to a big increase in federal grants and loans to needy college students. Bridget Terry Long's chapter in *Legacies* shows that if we exclude veterans' benefits and adjust for inflation, federal grants and loans to college students rose from \$800 million in 1963–1964 to \$15 billion in 1973–1974 and \$157 billion in 2010–2011.³ Most of that increase took the form of low-interest loans backed by the federal government, not outright grants. Much of it also went to students from families with incomes well above the poverty line. But Pell Grants to relatively poor students began to grow after 1973–1974 and totaled \$35 billion by 2010–2011.

The initial goal of all this federal spending was to reduce the difference between rich and poor children's chances of attending and completing college. That has not happened. In the mid-1990s Congress broadened federal financial aid to include middle-income

³These expenditures are reported in 2010 dollars.

families, reducing low-income students' share of the pot. But the college attendance gap had been widening even before that. Daron Acemoglu and Jörn-Steffen Pischke, for example, have compared the percentages of students in the high school classes of 1972, 1982, and 1992 who entered a four-year college within two years of finishing high school. Among students from the top quarter of income distribution, the percentage entering a four-year college rose from 51 to 66 percent between 1972 and 1992. Among those from the bottom quarter of the income distribution, the percentage rose only about half as much, from 22 to 30 percent.⁴

The same pattern recurs when we look at college dropout rates. Martha Bailey and Susan Dynarski have compared college graduation rates among students who were freshmen in 1979–1983 to the rates among those who were freshman eighteen years later, in 1997–2001.⁵ The graduation rate among the freshmen from the top quarter of the income distribution rose from 59 to 67 percent. Among freshmen from the bottom quarter of the income distribution, the graduation rate rose only half as much, from 28 to 32 percent. The gap between the graduation rates of high- and low-income freshmen therefore widened from 31 to 35 percentage points—a fairly small change, but clearly in the wrong direction.

Rising college costs are the most obvious explanation for the rising correlation between college attendance and parental income. Tuition and fees in public four-year colleges and universities rose twice as fast as the Consumer Price Index between 1979–1982, when Bailey and Dynarski's first cohort was entering college, and 1997–2000, when their second cohort was entering.

Rising tuition reflected several political changes: growing opposition to tax increases among those who elect state legislators, growing competition for state tax revenue from prisons, hospitals, and other services, and the fact that federal financial aid now allowed low-income students to pay a larger fraction of their college costs.

The combination of rising college costs and growing reliance on student loans to pay those costs led to a sharp rise in debt among both low-income and middle-income students. For students who chose their college major with one eye on the job market and went on to earn a four-year degree, repaying loans was often difficult but seldom impossible. But two thirds of the low-income freshmen and about half of middle-income freshmen in four-year colleges leave without earning a four-year degree. After that, earning enough to both support themselves and repay their college loans often proves impossible, especially if they have majored in a subject like teacher education, sociology, or the arts, which employers tend to view as “soft.”

⁴Daron Acemoglu and Jörn-Steffen Pischke, “Changes in the Wage Structure, Family Income, and Children's Education,” *European Economic Review*, Vol. 45 (2001).

⁵Martha J. Bailey and Susan M. Dynarski, “Inequality in Postsecondary Education,” in *Whither Opportunity?: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*, edited by Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

Low-income high school students became increasingly aware that a lot of students like them were having trouble paying back their loans. As a result, many students whose parents could not pay the full cost of college decided to postpone college, take a job, and go to college after they had saved enough to cover the cost. Few earned enough to do that. Others went to college for a year, got so-so grades, concluded that borrowing more to stay in college was too risky, and dropped out. As an experiment in social policy, college loans may not have been a complete failure, but they cannot be counted as a success.

Social Security

When Social Security was established in the 1930s, many occupations and industries were not part of the system. Those exemptions were narrowed over the next three decades, but benefits are still limited to those who have worked in employment that is covered by the system, and they still vary depending on how much one earned. As a result, almost everyone thinks Social Security recipients have “earned” their benefits, even when the amount they receive is far larger than what they would have gotten if they had invested the same amount of money in a private pension fund.

Nonetheless, the combined effect of not having covered all workers during Social Security's early years and the low wages and sporadic employment of many people who retired in the 1940s and 1950 meant that about 30 percent of the elderly were below the poverty line in 1964. When President Johnson looked for ways to cut poverty quickly without giving money to those whom he thought voters saw as undeserving, he almost inevitably chose the elderly poor as his first target.

After adjusting for inflation, Congress raised Social Security's average monthly benefits by about 50 percent between 1965 and 1973.⁶ These increases aroused little organized opposition, partly because workers who had not yet retired expected that making the system more generous today would benefit them too once they reached retirement age. In addition, many of the elderly poor were relying on their middle-aged children to make ends meet in 1964. Every increase in Social Security benefits reduced the economic burden on those children, many of whom were far from affluent.

Higher real benefits, combined with increases in the proportion of surviving retirees who had worked in covered employment long enough to qualify for full benefits, cut the poverty rate among the elderly from 30 percent in 1964 to 15 percent in 1974. By 1984 the official poverty rate was the same among the elderly as among the non-elderly. Today the poverty rate among the elderly is only two thirds that among eighteen- to sixty-four-year-olds and half that among children. Raising Social Security benefits was, in short, the simplest, least controversial, and most effective antipoverty program of the past half-century.

⁶See Kathleen McGarry, “The Safety Net for the Elderly,” *Legacies of the War on Poverty*, Figure 7.1, p. 184.

The Safety Net

The premise of a “safety net” is that a rich society should make sure all its members have certain basic necessities like food, shelter, and medical care, even if they have done nothing to earn these benefits. After all, the argument goes, we feel obligated to provide these necessities even to convicted felons. Yet the idea remains controversial in the United States, where many politicians and voters habitually describe such programs as providing handouts. The two major national programs that try to help almost everyone in need are Medicaid and food stamps. These programs enjoy far less political support than Social Security. Thus far, however, they have survived. Here, I concentrate on food stamps.



A child in a Head Start program, Washington, D.C., 1990

Jane Waldfogel begins her chapter of *Legacies* by describing the nutrition of poor Americans in the mid-1960s. Her most vivid evidence comes from a 1967 report by Raymond Wheeler, a physician who had traveled through the South along with various colleagues, providing medical examinations for poor black children. Wheeler's report chronicles the symptoms of hunger and malnutrition that he and his colleagues saw. No one who read it was likely to forget the third-world conditions it reported. Read alongside the Agriculture Department's summary of its 1965–1966 Household Food Consumption Survey, which estimated that over a third of all low-income households had poor diets, and the Selective Service System's report on why it found so many young men from the South unfit for military service, Wheeler's report helped broaden political support for federal action to reduce hunger. That support was reinforced by a 1968 CBS documentary on *Hunger in America*. Nonetheless, the response was slow.

The Johnson administration inherited a tiny pilot program, established in 1961 by the Kennedy administration, that offered food stamps to poor people in a handful of counties. Congress expanded that program in 1964, but it was still limited to a small number of poor counties. Coverage expanded fairly steadily over the next decade, but food stamps did not become available throughout the United States until 1975. Today the program provides a maximum monthly benefit of \$185 for each family member. The amount falls as a

family's cash income rises. It does not pay for anything but food, but it is more than the United States provided before Johnson launched the War on Poverty.

Because food stamps became available at different times in different counties, Douglas Almond, Hilary Hoynes, and Diane Schanzenbach have been able to produce quite convincing estimates of how their availability affected recipients' health.⁷ They show, for example, that living in a county where food stamps were available during the last trimester of a mother's pregnancy reduced her likelihood of having an underweight baby. They also show that living in a county where food stamps were available for more months between a child's estimated date of conception and its fifth birthday improved the child's health in adulthood, reducing the likelihood of what is known as “metabolic syndrome” (diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and heart disease).⁸

Nonetheless, the politics of food stamps remain complicated. The program's political survival and growth have long depended on a log-rolling deal in which urban legislators who favor food stamps agree to vote for agricultural subsidies that they view as wasteful if rural legislators who favor agricultural subsidies agree to vote for food stamps that they view as unearned handouts. That deal could easily unravel.

2.

If I am right that poverty as we understood the term in the 1960s has fallen by three quarters, Democrats should be mounting more challenges to Republican claims that the War on Poverty failed. A first step would be to fix the official poverty measure. A second step would be to come clean about which parts of the War on Poverty worked and which ones do not appear to have worked, and stop supporting the parts that appear ineffective.

On the one hand, there have clearly been more successes than today's Republicans acknowledge, at least in public. Raising Social Security benefits played a major part in cutting poverty among the elderly. The Earned Income Tax Credit cut poverty among single mothers. Food stamps improve living standards for most poor families. Medicaid also improves the lives of the poor. Even Section 8 rent subsidies, which I have not discussed, improve living standards among the poor families lucky enough to get one, although the money might do more good if it were distributed in a less random way. Head Start also turns out to help poor children stay on track for somewhat better lives than their parents had.

On the other hand, Republican claims that antipoverty programs were ineffective and wasteful also appear to have been well founded in many cases. Title I spending on elementary and

⁷See Douglas Almond, Hilary W. Hoynes, and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, “Inside the War on Poverty: The Impact of Food Stamps on Birth Outcomes,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (May 2011).

⁸See Hilary Hoynes, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond, “Long-Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net,” Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, November 2012.

secondary education has had few identifiable benefits, although the design of the program would make it hard to identify such benefits even if they existed. Relying on student loans rather than grants to finance the early years of higher education has discouraged an unknown number of low-income students from entering college, because of the fear that they will not be able to pay the loans back if they do not graduate. Job-training programs for the least employable have also yielded modest benefits. The community action pro-

grams that challenged the authority of elected local officials during the 1960s might have been a fine idea if they had been privately funded, but using federal money to pay for attacks on elected officials was a political disaster.

The fact that the War on Poverty included some unsuccessful programs is not an indictment of the overall effort. Failures are an inevitable part of any program that requires experimentation. The problem is that most of these programs still exist. Job-training programs that don't work still pop up and

disappear. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act still pushes money into the hands of educators who do not raise poor children's test scores. It has had little in the way of tangible results. Increasingly large student loans still allow colleges to raise tuition faster than family incomes rise, and rising costs still discourage many poor students from attending or completing college.

It takes time to produce disinterested assessments of political programs. The Government Accountability Office has done good assessments of some nar-

rowly defined programs, but assessing strategic choices about how best to fight poverty has been left largely to journalists, university scholars, and organizations like the Russell Sage Foundation, which paid for *Legacies*. Scholars are not completely disinterested either, but in this case we can be grateful that a small group has helped us reach a more balanced judgment about a noble experiment. We did not lose the War on Poverty. We gained some ground. Quite a lot of ground. □

—*This is the second of two articles.*

'A New Way of Writing About Race'

Nick Laird

Citizen:
An American Lyric
by Claudia Rankine.
Graywolf, 169 pp., \$20.00 (paper)

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* opens:

When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows.

The reader is forewarned: what follows will explore what happens when the "devices" are switched off, not just the smart phone or the iPad, but techniques of evasion and compromise that let the poet exist in the present. There's also the suggestion that the repudiated "devices" are poetic, rhetorical tricks that ornament or soften. Accordingly, Rankine's language is prose, plain, direct, conversational, though simultaneously uncanny and reverberant, continually wrongfooting the reader, swapping referents, mixing the physical and metaphysical at will. (It's not just "you" "stacked among your pillows" but the past itself.)

Told mostly through a series of "micro-aggressions" (the term coined by Harvard professor Chester Pierce in 1970 to describe unconscious insults nonblack Americans aim at black people), *Citizen* is a circuitous and intimate descent into the poet's past in order to examine race in America. Some of the incidents happen to the poet, some are reports from friends. Rankine writes almost exclusively in the second-person present, a tense that implicates as it includes, endowing events with a sense of immediacy and urgency.

As in her last book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004, with which it shares a subtitle, *An American Lyric*), *Citizen* combines commentary, "lyric essays," reproductions of artworks, frequent quotation from artists and critics (including Frederick Douglass, Chris Marker, Claire Denis, Ralph Ellison, and Frantz Fanon), scripts for films, and an eight-page lined poem (section VII). Rankine's writing is, to borrow Jack Spicer's phrase, "a collage of the real," and doesn't lend itself easily to short excerpts. The force of her work (and it has plenty) is mostly achieved incrementally, drawing meanings from cumulative patterns, in a tone almost flat, resigned, but punctuated with moments of emotion: rage,



Claudia Rankine, New York City, 2014

exhaustion, disgust. The impression is of an intensely sensitive writer—in both senses—trying to confront the mess of modern America with a clear critique. In a historic first, *Citizen* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award in both poetry and criticism and on March 12 won the award for poetry.

At the core of *Citizen* is an "anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every brown or black person lives simply because of skin color." In "Making Room," Rankine writes:

On the train the woman standing makes you understand there are no seats available. And, in fact, there

is one. Is the woman getting off at the next stop? No, she would rather stand all the way to Union Station.

The space next to the man is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill. You step quickly over the woman's fear, a fear she shares. You let her have it....

When another passenger leaves his seat and the standing woman sits, you glance over at the man. He is gazing out the window into what looks like darkness.

Rankine's sentences have a great deal of doubling and repetition in them—standing, understand, stand—and the eye is encouraged to skim over

the surface, but while the language appears at first direct, colloquial, it's actually distinctly odd and ramifying. In that movement where the poet "step[s] quickly over the woman's fear," an action becomes an idea, and the phrase "a fear she shares"—which would normally mean we partake in her fear—shifts to imply that the woman has expressed a fear that the poet has refused to accept: "You let her have it."

What a resonant double-edged little phrase: standing behind the gesture of renunciation—you can keep your fear—is the demotic meaning, a submerged, even violent anger. And then that freighted word "Union" splinters out historically, ironically: there is only separation here on the train. Rankine's language continually undermines the casual reading it encourages, revealing how exchanges are coded, complex, how tone decides everything. (Later, in a script about Zinedine Zidane—the famous soccer player who, because of an insult, knocked a player to the ground with a head butt after the 2006 World Cup Final—she quotes Ralph Ellison: "Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word.")

The poet sits "next to the man on the train, bus, in the plane, waiting room, anywhere he could be forsaken" and hears a woman ask "a man in the rows ahead if he would mind switching seats. She wishes to sit with her daughter or son. You hear but you don't hear. You can't see."

It's then the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you'll tell them we are traveling as a family.

Rankine's response to the perceived racial slight is to fully align herself with the man, at least inside her head. The past—both personal and historical—demands it:

A friend argues that Americans battle between the "historical self" and the "self self." By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your

white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning.

Rankine was born in 1963 in Kingston, Jamaica, and studied at Williams College, then took an MFA at Columbia. She's published five collections of poetry, edited several anthologies, and is the recipient of many fellowships and awards, including the 2014 Jackson Prize. She's the Henry G. Lee Professor of English at Pomona and a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

In *Citizen* she presents her life as lived in the mostly Caucasian world of the academy, of privilege: she speaks of tennis lessons, housekeepers, conferences. Many pieces are about how her color precludes acceptance in this white space she inhabits. She foregrounds her own position ("Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you have already settled into your window seat...") as a means of demonstrating an all-pervasive racism that cuts through economic and social privilege. The micro-aggressions she suffers may seem small compared to the brutality and indignity experienced by those less fortunate, but they are still presented as corrosive, undermining, and overwhelming.

Citizen suggests that racial harmony is superficial—skin-deep—and Americans revert readily and easily to their respective racial camps. A friend's son is knocked over in the subway—again, the ethnicity of those involved is not made explicit—"but the son of a bitch kept walking." The friend says she

grabbed the stranger's arm and... told him to look at the boy and apologize. Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.

The beautiful thing is that a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers.

(A recurring theme is the paradox of being seen but not seen, of being both overly visible and completely invisible.) Concerned citizens of all colors do not stop to help, the story tells us without quite saying so, but only black men, "like newly found uncles and brothers."

Whether buying a coffee or in line at the drugstore, Rankine encounters this invisibility that racism occasions:

It's finally your turn, and then it's not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised.

Oh my god, I didn't see you.

You must be in a hurry, you offer.

No, no, no, I really didn't see you.

Another incident:

When the waitress hands your friend the card she took from you, you laugh and ask [the friend] what else her privilege gets her? Oh, my perfect life, she answers. Then you

both are laughing so hard, everyone in the restaurant smiles.

This is how racism works: it blocks the possibility of living an undefended life. For those who know "the urgency brought on by an overflow of compromises, deaths, and tempers specific to a profile woke to and gone to sleep to each day," every incident is a possible example of it. In an open letter discussing "The Change," a poem by her erstwhile colleague the poet Tony Hoagland (Rankine maintains that "some readers perceived [it] to be... racist" and Hoagland maintains that it is "racially complex"), she writes that "when offense is being taken offense is heard everywhere, even in the imagination."



An altered photograph of a public lynching, Marion, Indiana, August 1930; created by Claudia Rankine's husband, John Lucas, from *Citizen*

Citizen contains several "scripts for situations," texts for documentary films made with Rankine's husband John Lucas. There are scripts about Hurricane Katrina ("comprised of quotes collected from CNN"), the Jena Six, Trayvon Martin, James Craig Anderson, stop-and-frisk, and the 2006 World Cup Final when Zidane head-butted Marco Materazzi. The scripts make use of Rankine's gift for repetition and variation and, throughout the book, artworks are reproduced to inform these texts. In the Katrina script the refrain "Have you seen their faces?" recurs: the next page is a large ink drawing of a black man's face by the Nigerian artist Toyin Odutola. *Citizen* demands that we look: Rankine repeatedly returns to the space a black body occupies in a white world. She quotes the artist Glenn Ligon quoting Zora Neale Hurston, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," adding that it "seemed to be ad copy for some aspect of life for all black bodies."

In these scripts the writing moves backward and forward, setting out thesis and antithesis (though tellingly no synthesis), as it tries to enter the associated paradoxes and inconsistencies. Here is an extract from the script for Trayvon Martin, who, walking to his father's apartment, was talking on the phone to his girlfriend when he was followed, and ultimately killed, by the Latino neighborhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman:

If I called I'd say good-bye before I broke the good-bye. I say good-bye before anyone can hang up. Don't hang up. My brother hangs up though he is there. I keep talking. The talk keeps him there. The sky is blue, kind of blue. The day is hot. Is it cold? Are you cold? It does get cool. Is it cool? Are you cool?

My brother is completed by sky. The sky is his silence. Eventually, he says, it is raining. It is raining down. It was raining. It stopped raining. It is raining down.

When Rankine reads her work aloud it is often in a monotone, a kind of robotic exhaustion. This allows the short phrasings to open out into many meanings: "Are you cold?" can mean

"Are you unfeeling?" even "Are you dead?" "Is it cool?" can mean "Is this allowed?" "What is happening?" "Are you cool?" suggests "Are we fine?" "Is something wrong?" The many senses grow organically out of the phrasal variations, a form of verbal riffing that finds its musical equivalent in jazz (leading us back to the Miles Davis reference: "kind of blue"). "It is raining down" suggests the physical fight between Zimmerman and Martin: we hear the idiom "blows raining down" behind it. Rankine's phrases follow the narrative of the incident, but obliquely. Her work is extremely unusual in the limits she sets on her own language, in its understanding of and belief in the efficacy of the tonal ambiguity of ordinary idioms.

Citizen repays repeated readings: it's arch-like, each piece supporting the other, and one begins to notice the deep metaphors of the book, such as the idea of tennis, of serve and return. Perhaps the strongest essay about the relation of a black body to a white space concerns Serena Williams and her treatment in the white world of tennis. This probing essay seems to have its origins in that public argument Rankine had with Tony Hoagland. In Hoagland's poem "The Change" he refers to, presumably, Venus Williams, as "that big black girl.../cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms,/some outrageous name like Vondella Aphro-

dite." He goes on to call her "so big/and so black,/so unintimidated...like she wasn't asking anyone's permission."

The speaker in the poem can't "help wanting/the white girl to come out on top/because she was one of my kind, my tribe" even though she is European and the black player is American. "The Change"—though she never refers to it in *Citizen*—has caused Rankine to consider the racism meted out to the Williams sisters, the bad calls, and their responses to them, and enables her to write of the problems of articulating black anger. She writes of "Hennessy Youngman," an alter ego of the artist Jayson Musson, "whose *Art Thoughtz* take the form of tutorials on YouTube...on contemporary art issues."

He addresses how to become a successful black artist, wryly suggesting black people's anger is marketable. He advises black artists to cultivate "an angry nigger exterior" by watching, among other things, the Rodney King video while working... The commodified anger his video advocates... can be engaged or played like the race card and is tied solely to the performance of blackness and not to the emotional state of particular individuals in particular situations.

Rankine's own work succeeds in most clearly delineating "actual anger" from "sellable anger" when actual anger is tied "to the emotional state of particular individuals in particular situations."

The Rodney King video recurs later in *Citizen* when Rankine again outlines the problem of (the lack of) white empathy toward black suffering. In "In Memory of Mark Duggan" Rankine is in London at a party "in a house worth more than a million pounds" (in a book full of contemporary references, this is perhaps the only one that already feels dated) and meets an English novelist. She writes that "the Hackney riots" (she means the riots that started in Tottenham, a district of Haringay, and spread throughout London, and then England) "began at the end of the summer of 2011 when Mark Duggan, a black man, a husband, a father, and a suspected drug dealer, was shot dead by officers from Scotland Yard's Operation Trident."

She quotes James Baldwin, "the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers," and compares the London riots with the LA riots that followed Rodney King's beating, suggesting that "if there had been a video of Duggan being executed, there might be less ambiguity around what started the riots." The English novelist asks, "Will you write about Duggan?" "Why don't you? you ask. Me? he asks, looking slightly irritated." Rankine argues that

though in this man's body, the man made of English sky, grief exists for Duggan as a black man gunned down, there is not the urgency brought on by an overflow of compromises, deaths, and tempers specific to a profile woke to and gone to sleep to each day.

She argues that "grief comes out of relationships to subjects over time and not to any subject in theory." The distance between her and the novelist

“is thrown into relief: bodies moving through the same life differently.... Apparently your new friend won’t write about Mark Duggan or the London riots; still you continue searching his face because there is something to find, an answer to question.”

She asks in relation to the white novelist, “Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?” The questions that Rankine’s art lays bare circle almost exclusively around race (“A similar accumulation and release drove many Americans to respond to the Rodney King beating.... As a black body in the States, your response was necessary....”). But it happens that the English riots were different in kind from, say, the LA or Ferguson riots. For one thing, in every city including London the largest group involved in rioting was white (though those of British Caribbean and British African ethnicity were disproportionately represented), suggesting that the causal tensions and failures were not delimited by skin color. Any reading of the sources of the English riots would have to include social exclusion, family breakdown, government cuts to welfare, mass unemployment and poverty, gang culture and criminal opportunism, a kind of communal “fun,” anticorporate feeling, and the advent of mobile technology and social media.

The English novelist’s inability to reply positively in relation to Mark Duggan, to reply to Rankine that he will write about him, reminds me of an incident in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. Rankine’s own ability to access grief for people she’s never met but feels for because of “a profile woke to and gone to sleep to each day” doesn’t stretch to women, for example, or at least not a particular white woman. She writes about visiting a pop-up museum on London’s South Bank, run by the Body Shop:

The Museum of Emotions in London has a game that asks *yes* and *no* questions. As long as you answer “correctly,” you can continue playing. The third question is: Were you terribly upset and did you find yourself weeping when Princess Diana died?

I told the truth and stepped on the NO tile. I was not allowed to continue. The museum employee, who must have had a thing with shame, looked away as I stepped down. Walking out, I couldn’t help but think the question should have been, Was Princess Diana ever really alive? I mean, alive to anyone outside of her friends and family—truly?

Rankine questions the authenticity of the mourners of Princess Diana’s death, a mourning she finds lacking in the English novelist, and yet it’s hard not to hear the questions she poses as inflecting her own process of grieving that *Citizen* enacts in a piece like “In Memory of Mark Duggan”:

Weren’t they mourning the protection they felt she should have had? A protection they’ll never have? Weren’t they simply grieving the

random inevitability of their own deaths?

One problem with writing poetry about political or historical issues is that poetry proves a terrible method for transmitting real information. The personal poems in *Citizen*, the anecdotes and micro-aggressions, have considerably more power than the more abstracted ones. The elegy for Trayvon Martin works because Rankine imagines, inhabits, and replays the actual events, of which we too have some knowledge. The elegy for Mark Duggan works insofar as it portrays a social friction between two middle-class artists, but I’m not sure it goes much further than that. Its too-smooth equation of the UK and LA riots, of Mark Duggan and Rodney King, flattens and reduces detail in a way familiar in political language but difficult to work successfully into poetry.

Rankine’s work though, as the NBCC nominations suggested, is on the cusp of poetry and critique; her reductionism, of course, is *meant*, and is intended to be symptomatic of the culture: it wants to simplify as racism simplifies; she means to tell us that these people were killed precisely because they were black. This is page 134 of *Citizen*, in its entirety:

November 23, 2012 / In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

August 9, 2014 / In Memory of Michael Brown

Page 135 states simply:

February 15, 2014 / The Justice System

The book has no explanatory notes but Jordan Russell Davis, an unarmed seventeen-year-old African-American, was shot and killed by a forty-five-year-old software developer, Michael Dunn (white), when he fired into a car full of black teenagers in an argument over loud music at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida. Dunn was convicted on October 1, 2014, and sentenced to life in prison without parole. Michael Brown was an unarmed eighteen-year-old African-American who was shot by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Rankine lets the blank page stand in for a joint elegy—though by any reading the cases are very different.*

*This was the second edition of *Citizen*, which I was sent to review. The third edition adds two more names: Eric Garner, an African-American who died in July 2014 on Staten Island after Police Officer Daniel Pantaleo put him in a chokehold, and John Crawford, the twenty-two-year-old African-American who picked up an unpackaged BB gun in an Ohio Walmart and continued talking on the phone, standing by himself in an aisle before being gunned down by policemen.

The CCTV footage makes it clear that no warning was issued to John Crawford, and in any event Ohio is an “open carry” state where carrying and displaying firearms is legal. Again,

When we march under one banner for different causes, when we gather many different cases under the title “Black Lives Matter,” for example, simplification is needed. Political movements require basic statements like these in order to gather disparate groups into one powerful bloc. But lyric poetry tends not to work like that. It chases particulars. Its symbols are not public ones. It aspires to compress without simplifying. *Citizen* dares to reject those tenets. It suggests that because white culture is prevalently reductionist, seeing a black man and feeling fear, viewing blackness as one monolithic construct (Rankine refers to “the ‘all black people look the same’ moment”), the poetry that responds should likewise be unafraid to adopt those modes, to link and equate the deaths of different black men without regard to respective circumstances.

There is a (left-wing) view that even to discuss those circumstances is to attempt to obscure the nature of the wrong. In the sociological terminology relating to African-American studies, Rankine is a “structuralist,” emphasizing the influence of institutional racism above all else, while those who highlight the influence of self-perpetuating norms and behaviors are known as “culturalists”; we might

astonishingly, a grand jury declined to indict the police officers involved. The third edition of *Citizen* replaces the date and words “The Justice System” on page 135 with the haiku-like “because white men can’t/police their imagination/black men are dying.”

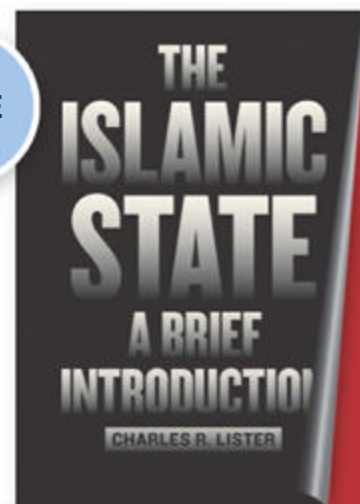
say the popular singer Pharrell Williams showed himself to be a culturalist when he pointed to the “bully-ish” behavior of Michael Brown, referring to the CCTV footage of Brown robbing a store and assaulting the owner minutes before the confrontation with Officer Wilson. Williams was shouted down on social media and accused of “victim-blaming.”

Attempting to differentiate the political and poetical methodologies of *Citizen* feels similarly fraught, but where the book is complicit in abridging, as in the bare pages above, and where the poetry is replaced by a structuralist critique that simply names and equates, it can feel like the renunciation of a responsibility that Rankine elsewhere brilliantly articulates and assumes. She refers to Robert Lowell in *Citizen*, and one thinks of his view of poetic function: “We are poor passing facts,/warned by that to give/each figure in the photograph/his living name.”

But when Rankine’s voice connects—as in “Making Room” or “In Memory of Trayvon Martin”—her work is wonderfully capacious and innovative. In her riffs on the demotic, in her layering of incident, she finds a new way of writing about race in America. Although Marjorie Perloff praises *Citizen* by saying that “Rankine is never didactic: she merely *presents*... allowing you to draw your own conclusions,” the opposite is actually the case. Rankine’s series of anecdotes are geared to a purpose and theme: they are ethical formulations that are too honest and angry to be merely presentations; they’re intended as proofs. □

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Is Reason Enough?

Adam Kirsch

Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism

by Philip Kitcher.

Yale University Press, 175 pp., \$25.00

So far, one of the chief lessons the twenty-first century has taught us is that you can't deduce anything from what century it is. President Obama likes to denounce Vladimir Putin's power politics in Ukraine as belonging to the nineteenth century, but Putin seems to have no problem conducting a nineteenth-century foreign policy in the year 2014. Likewise, ISIS's beheadings of "infidels" evoke the seventh century, and West Africans living in terror of Ebola are reenacting the Black Death of the fourteenth. To say that these things should not exist today is itself a kind of primitive incantation, which attempts to banish as historical things that every day prove themselves utterly contemporary.

A milder, but in a sense even stranger, manifestation of this principle can be found in the current debate about religion and atheism. In the polemics of the New Atheists, we find reprised the furious Enlightenment contempt for religion that animated Voltaire and the philosophes, alongside the scientific arguments against religion that convinced Darwin and his contemporaries. The arguments have not changed; even the emotions are the same. Yet the paladins of reason, having slain the beast of superstition, find that it refuses to stay dead.

The reason, of course, is that the loss of faith is not something that happened to all of humanity at a single moment. Because faith still survives, and in many places thrives, the loss of faith is not a historical phenomenon but a biographical one. As Nietzsche's madman foresaw, the death of God does not happen once, but again and again, whenever the news of it reaches a new listener:

This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant to them than the remotest stars—and yet they have done it themselves!

What this means is that, like the early Christians, secular humanists have the duty to be evangelists—to spread what is, to them, the good news that there is no God. *Life After Faith*, the deeply thoughtful new book by Philip Kitcher, takes this duty seriously; and its seriousness lies in its recognition that this fact, to many people, sounds not like a liberation but a defeat. The language we still use betrays this emotional fact: we talk of the death of God and the loss of faith, rather than the birth of reason or the achievement of truth. Perhaps this is because the absence of God, like our own mortality, runs contrary to our native instincts. Just as children are fundamentally convinced that they will not die, so they are born believing, or prepared to believe, in some kind of superintending providence. Truth



Rembrandt: The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1635

is not something we are born with and need merely hold onto; it is something painfully acquired through a process of maturity and disillusionment. Truth, as the novelist has it, comes in blows.

Kitcher's short book, based on his 2013 Terry Lectures at Yale University, accepts the premise that, in the argument between religion and disbelief, the latter bears the burden of proof—or, better, the burden of reassurance. Proof that God does not exist he takes to be, at this point in history, superfluous, which it surely is. Anyone who wants to learn the ethical, philosophical, or scientific arguments against belief can surely find them easily in Voltaire or Nietzsche, if not in Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris.

Life After Faith therefore disposes of the case against religion quickly, in the first of its five chapters, "Doubt Delineated." Kitcher focuses in particular on the claim to exclusivity that just about every major organized religion makes: the promise that in this church or this book alone truth and salvation are to be found. Psychologically, this is one of religion's most powerful weapons. There is nothing we want so much as reassurance that we are on the right path, and most religions offer this in an

absolute form. When he comes to discuss the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Kitcher is of course appalled, seeing a prototype of fanaticism and violence: "Abraham stands at the end of a continuum of those who are ready to do profoundly inhumane things in the name of religious faith."

What he does not discuss is why this story, so offensive to our ethical instincts, exerts such an attraction on believers and would-be believers, such as Kierkegaard. The reason, surely, is that a father who kills his son for God demonstrates in the most absolute way his certainty that he knows how to please God, for only certainty could justify such an atrocious act. And the ordinary believer's certainty may be bolstered by the certainty of the patriarch or the founder.

Kitcher, however, sees that this claim to exclusivity, which is each individual faith's strongest attraction, is a dangerous scandal for all faiths considered collectively. For it is plainly impossible for every religion's claim to be correct. "Nobody thinks the world is so full of mystic forces, sacred places, spirits, and divinities that the entire population of claimants can be accommodated," he writes. If God is Ra, he cannot also be Jesus Christ. In fact, religions have historically been much better at addressing this objection than Kitcher allows.

The Romans were happy to assimilate foreign gods to their own pantheon, while Islam's sacred history offers an internally consistent explanation for the existence of prior revelations from Moses and Jesus.

Still, Kitcher's point is a powerful one. If you try to imagine your way to an Archimedean point outside all religions and weigh the evidence for each one, you may find that none has an advantage. Each can lay claim to its sacred founder, its holy scripture, its justificatory miracles. And in fact, this is not the way human beings find themselves declaring allegiance to a particular religion. While conversions do take place, it is virtually never the case that people choose their faith based on a consideration of the truth claims of all the rival possibilities.

The embarrassing fact is that most religious people seem to believe in a religion for no better reason than that their parents believed in it. "How can a devout person, deeply convinced of some specific, substantive doctrine—the claim that the world is the creation of a single personal deity, say—come to terms with this predicament?" Kitcher asks.

To face it clearly is to recognize that if, by some accident of early childhood, he had been transported to some distant culture, brought up among aboriginal Australians, for example, he would now affirm a radically different set of doctrines... and would do so with the same deep conviction and as a result of the same types of processes that characterize his actual beliefs.

To Kitcher, this critical argument is sufficient to dispose of the exclusive truth claims of every religious tradition. Still, if no religion has a monopoly on truth, it is possible that all religions are equally true in a certain way—that is, metaphorically. The stories told by Islam, Hinduism, and Greek paganism may all be just that, stories; yet they may converge on a common truth, which shines through the veil of myth and fable.

This is the position taken by advocates of what Kitcher calls "refined religion," the subject of his third chapter. Refined religion worships not this or that god, but "the transcendent," and "the world's religions can be appreciated as invoking an aspect of reality—the transcendent—that exceeds any human ability to describe it in literal language." This ecumenicism goes hand in hand with pragmatism: a true faith is one that empowers its believers, regardless of the literal truth of its scriptures and doctrines. "The crucial question," Kitcher explains, "concerns the capacity of metaphors, myths, and stories to orient the lives of the faithful in valuable ways."

Refined religion is a frustrating interlocutor for the skeptic, because it seems to retreat from every concrete, debatable truth claim, while still retaining the kind of authority associated with traditional faith. As Kitcher puts it, refined religion "escapes the secu-

State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

larist argument by diverging from the assumptions on which that argument depends”—such as the assumption that you can only consider yourself an adherent of a religion if you actually affirm its doctrines. Instead, it may place a higher value on ritual, community, and tradition, on the practices of religion rather than its formal tenets.

Yet the very refinements that make religion more acceptable to the intellect also weaken its ability to ground any positive beliefs—say, about ethics. To deduce any kind of values from “the transcendent,” we must believe that the transcendent has the power to communicate with us, to tell us how to live; and that is just the kind of belief that refined religion abjures. At best, Kitcher concludes, the transcendent can be seen as a source of extra passion and commitment in the pursuit of ethical values we derive independently, by consulting our own reason. This is a moderate enough faith: it relies on the expectation that “secular humanists and champions of refined religion ought to recognize one another as allies, at least in some battles,” even if “in the end...peaceful coexistence must give way to renewed argument.”

But is reason a firm enough ground to support the values we need in order to live? Can there be a purely humanistic ethics, in which right and wrong enjoy no supernatural sanction? Religious believers doubt it—without God, they believe, everything is permitted. Empirically, this is a weak argument: history shows that even with God everything is permitted, and there are plenty of ethically exemplary atheists. But Kitcher takes the objection seriously, devoting his second chapter, “Values Vindicated,” to providing an account of how ethics can emerge in the absence of faith.

He begins by citing the classic dilemma Plato advanced in the *Euthyphro*: “If goodness is what the deity wills, does the goodness arise from the divine willing, or does the willing respond to the goodness?” That is, do we pursue the good because it is good, or simply because God commanded it? The fact that we can imagine God commanding something evil—say, child sacrifice—suggests that our intuitions about good and evil are independent of, and prior to, our knowledge of God’s will. But if so, then ethics are not actually a product of the divine command; at best, they can be validated and reinforced by religion. Despite this powerful argument, however, Kitcher admits that “the tight connection between religion and ethics survives. Nobody has succeeded in formulating any rival account of ethics that is both readily comprehensible and widely persuasive.”

Such an account is what Kitcher seeks to provide, in order to reassure the reader that “life after faith” does not mean a life without good and evil. His alternative is based on evolution, which is a notoriously precarious foundation for ethical argument. Human beings, Kitcher writes, following the current theories of anthropology and evolutionary biology, evolved from primates who possessed the unique faculty of “responsiveness”—the ability to intuit and react to the needs and desires of their fellows. In humanity, responsiveness is elaborated into a formal system of ethical behavior, allow-

ing us to live together in much larger societies than chimp bands: “rules for action, patterns for life together, stories to make them vivid and effective, structures for a shared social life.”

Human history, seen in this light, is a long experiment in improved responsiveness, in increased mutuality. In short, it is a story of progress. This notion itself presents problems, not only empirically—again, it wouldn’t be hard to read history as a tale of regress; the Holocaust took place in the twentieth century—but because progress seems to imply an external standard by which it could be measured. Kitcher denies that any such standard exists, because there is no extrahuman source of ethics. Still, he imagines a more pragmatic and improvisational kind of progress, in which human beings do not move toward a preordained perfection, but manage to solve ethical problems as they arise. “Provided progress is viewed as problem solving, the concept of ethical progress proves coherent,” he argues.

This idea will strike most readers as plausible and attractive, since it uses Darwinism, currently our most authoritative anthropology, to arrive at a familiar liberal politics, in which the goal of humanity is ever closer cooperation, fairer distribution of resources, and more widespread social justice. Still, it does not succeed in overcoming the basic distinction between fact and value with which Kitcher began.

It would be easy to offer an alternative, equally Darwinian account, in which the imperative of perpetuating our genes overrides the merely contingent ethical arrangements we have inherited from a distant, and very different, past. In such a scheme, the best reproductive strategy for each person is probably to become a free rider on social ethics—to allow others to do good so that I can concentrate on being selfish and maintaining my family. If anyone were to say, like Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, that in fact true justice is the advantage of the stronger, it is hard to see how Kitcher’s Darwinian account could refute him. To the extent that we experience ethics as not merely a preference but a duty, Darwinism, like any naturalism, cannot really explain them.

Religion gives us ethics to help us live; it also helps reconcile us to the fact that we have to die. In his fourth chapter, “Mortality and Meaning,” Kitcher addresses this element of religion, once again arguing that secular humanism has its own resources, that we need not rely on the transcendent to give our lives meaning. First of all, he argues, the longing for immortality, to which most religions cater, is not really coherent. We are made for finitude; life without an ending would not be what we consider a good life. “Rather than having a single coherent narrative arc, it would be a loose picaresque novel or a disjointed collection of short stories—however fulfilling the individual episodes might be, it would be hard to understand the whole as a life,” Kitcher argues. This is a powerful argument against immortality understood as perpetual life, though it does not confront the more profound conception of eternity as existence outside of time altogether, which is what most sophisticated religions promise.

As this literary analogy suggests, Kitcher defines a good life as one char-

acterized by wholeness and shapeliness, rather than mere duration:

Each meaningful life is distinguished by a theme, a conception of the self and a concomitant identification of the goals it is important to pursue. That theme should be autonomously chosen by the person whose life it is.

This is, of course, a highly privileged, even aristocratic definition of the purpose and possibility of life, and Kitcher recognizes that his ideal is simply out of reach for billions of people who remain mired in poverty and need or in a sense of aimlessness they cannot transcend. For him, this does not cancel the ideal, but only makes its realization more urgent: “Beyond declaring abstract rights we should demand that the world’s resources be shared so as to allow to all people...the opportunity for a meaningful life.”

Here too, Kitcher’s appealing argument rests on assumptions that are susceptible to challenge. For one thing, he takes for granted that the world’s resources can sustain, and human nature will permit, the construction of a society in which every person enjoys the plenty and leisure needed to concentrate on “life themes.” This is, to put it mildly, a questionable assumption; certainly nothing like it has ever existed in the past.

Then again, the idea of life as a coherent narrative with a defining theme seems—although Kitcher does not say this—to be derived from an analogy with the nineteenth-century novel—the very form that so much of the last

hundred-plus years have been devoted to deconstructing. What if our lives are not like *David Copperfield* or even *Buddenbrooks*, but instead like *Ulysses*, a disorganized stream of thoughts and impressions, or like *The Stranger*, an anesthetized progress through an alienated world? What if it is precisely the dwindling of our religious inheritance, over the last two centuries, that accounts for the gradual disintegration of the bildungsroman as a life ideal?

In the book’s last chapter, Kitcher recognizes that literature can, in fact, offer a challenge to secular humanism’s composure. His brief readings of *King Lear* and *The Brothers Karamazov* show how these works portray a universe of tragedy and depravity, in which evil and suffering are not eradicable accidents but deeply woven into the texture of being. Yet he is not finally discomposed by these messages. “The great works I have all too briefly reviewed can be—should be—profoundly disturbing,” he writes, yet he remains convinced that this kind of disturbance is ultimately salutary for secularism, rather than disabling to it. “The secular sense of ‘our own good,’ of what is worth wanting, is refined and deepened by struggling with their tragic vision, by trying to overcome the dangers they threaten.”

The composure and dignity of *Life After Faith* are owed to this serene confidence that secular humanism can, ultimately, give us what we demand from religion, and on a firmer basis of truth. If the loss of faith is a genuine wound, however, is it really possible to heal it so completely that it doesn’t leave at least a scar? □

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Health: The Right Diagnosis and the Wrong Treatment

Marcia Angell

America's Bitter Pill: Money, Politics, Backroom Deals, and the Fight to Fix Our Broken Healthcare System

by Steven Brill.

Random House, 512 pp., \$28.00

Steven Brill has achieved the seemingly impossible—written an exciting book about the American health system. In his account of the passage of the Affordable Care Act (now known as Obamacare), he manages to transform a subject that usually befuddles and bores into a political thriller. There was reason to think he might pull it off; his lengthy 2013 *Time* magazine exposé of the impact of medical bills on ordinary people was engrossing. But his success also owes much to the Bob Woodward method of writing best sellers about government policy: interviews with hundreds of insiders, many anonymous, some evidently willing to talk to him to increase their chances of being shown in a favorable light.

For example, one of Brill's principal sources and a great favorite is Liz Fowler, chief health counsel to Senator Max Baucus, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, which oversaw the legislation. Brill credits her with being "more personally responsible than anyone for the drafting of what became Obamacare." He is unbothered by the fact that she was vice-president for public policy at WellPoint, the country's second-largest private insurance company, before taking her job with Senator Baucus, or by the fact that shortly after passage of the law (and a brief stint with the administration), she became head of global health policy at the drug company Johnson & Johnson—even though both of these industries benefited greatly from Obamacare.

By contrast, Brill is appropriately critical of others who used the revolving door between industry and government, such as Billy Tauzin, the congressman who pushed through the industry-friendly Medicare drug benefit in 2003 and then became head of the pharmaceutical industry's trade association. The excuse he gives for Fowler is that she was not a lobbyist, but that is hardly the point.

In view of his method, it's not surprising that there is as much political gossip and score-settling in Brill's book as analysis. Nevertheless, his description of our dysfunctional health system is dead-on. He shows in all its horror how the way we distribute health care like a market commodity instead of a social good has produced the most expensive, inequitable, and wasteful health system in the world. (The US now spends per capita two and a half times as much on health care as the average for the other OECD countries, while still leaving tens of millions of Americans uninsured.) Brill makes it clear that the problems are unlikely to be fixed by Obamacare. For that alone, his book deserves to be widely read.

Here are a few items in Brill's indictment. "Healthcare," he writes, "is America's largest industry by far." It



President Obama with Senators Max Baucus and Christopher Dodd at the White House after making a statement on Medicare prescription drugs, June 2009

employs "a sixth of the country's workforce. And it is the average American family's largest single expense, whether paid out of their pockets or through taxes and insurance premiums." He estimates that the health insurance companies employ about 1.5 million people, roughly twice the number of practicing physicians. Hospital executives preside over lucrative businesses, whether nominally nonprofit or not, and are paid huge salaries, even while they charge patients obscene prices (Brill cites \$77 for a box of gauze pads) drawn from "what they called their 'chargemaster,' which was the menu of list prices they used to soak patients who did not have Medicare or private insurance." He tells us that the CEO of New York-Presbyterian Hospital, where he had major surgery shortly after his article appeared in *Time*, had an income of \$3.58 million. And finally, he gives us the really bad news: "All that extra money produces no better, and in many cases worse, results."

When Barack Obama became president in 2009, reforming the American health system was at the top of his domestic agenda—ahead even of the banking crisis, housing foreclosures, and unemployment. And he was candid about the reason: soaring health costs were undermining nearly everything else. As examples: Medicare—the government program for Americans over age sixty-five—was a growing contributor to federal deficits; businesses that offered health benefits to their workers were at a competitive disadvantage, both domestically and globally; workers were afraid to leave jobs because they would lose health insurance if they did; and medical costs had become the chief cause of personal bankruptcy. In short, the American health system was no longer supportable.

When Obama was a state senator in

Illinois, he was on record as favoring a single-payer health system—that is, one in which the government ensures health care for all residents of the country and regulates the distribution of resources in a predominantly nonprofit system. That's the sort of system every other advanced country has. Even after he became president, Obama acknowledged in a press conference on July 22, 2009, that a single-payer system was the only way to achieve universal health care. Even so, except for that one admission, there was no further consideration of single-payer health care—by Obama or, crucially, by Senator Baucus—during the year Obamacare was crafted.

Instead, the launch of the reform effort was a White House media event in March 2009 that featured spokespersons for the for-profit health insurance and pharmaceutical industries, who pledged to work with the president to reform the system. But not for nothing. As a condition of its support, the insurance industry demanded that all Americans—except those in Medicare and other government programs—be required to purchase private insurance. The central role of the insurance industry would thus be not only preserved, but expanded and enshrined by law. As a condition of its support, the pharmaceutical industry demanded the continuation of two laws that Obama, as a candidate, had promised to try to overturn—one that forbids Medicare from using its purchasing power to control drug prices, and another that forbids Americans from importing cheaper drugs from other countries.

After these deals were struck, there followed a year of congressional wrangling, replete with further deals to mollify conservatives and the health industries. For example, the idea of a "public option," that is, government-sponsored insurance to compete with private insurers, was scuttled. The final

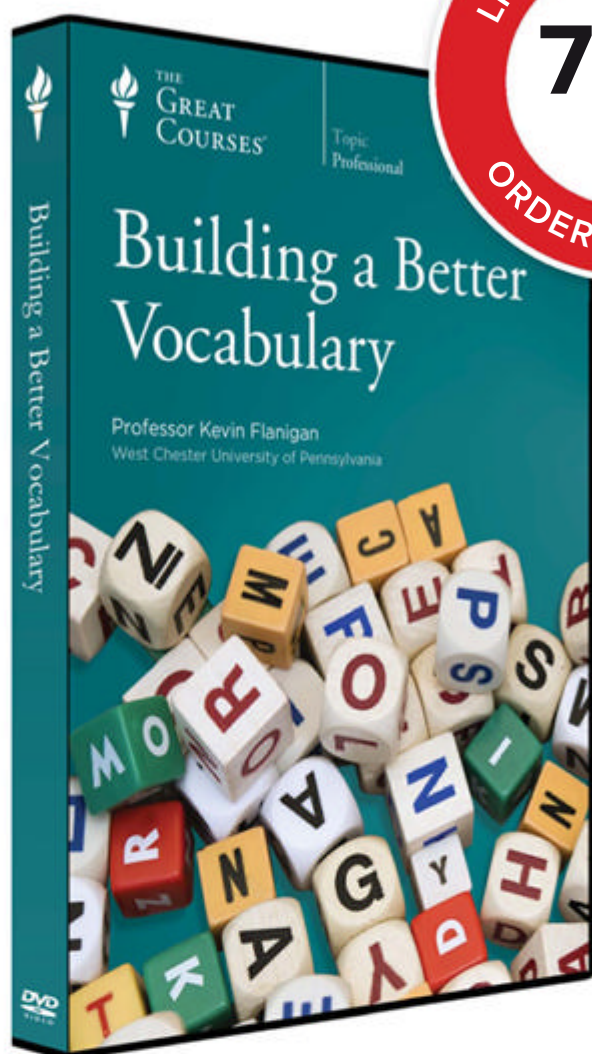
product—the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act—was signed into law on March 23, 2010, and scheduled to go into effect over ten years, with the major provisions in effect by 2014.

There were three essential elements of the new plan for expanding access to health care: first, the new law encouraged employers to provide health benefits to workers by fining large companies that don't offer insurance and subsidizing small companies that do. Second, Medicaid, the program for the poor, which is jointly supported by the federal and state governments, was to be expanded to cover an additional 16 million people. And third, everyone under age sixty-five without employer-sponsored insurance or Medicaid—estimated as another 16 million people—would be required to purchase their own private insurance policies or pay a fine. But there would be subsidies for those earning less than four times the poverty level (it was anticipated that most uninsured people would qualify for them), and states would create shopping exchanges for individuals and small businesses to pool risks and offer a menu of approved plans. Those were the main provisions to extend coverage, but of the roughly 50 million uninsured Americans at the time, the new law would still leave about 18 million, or 6 percent of the population, without any coverage at all.

In addition to extending coverage, the law called for regulations to curb the worst abuses of the insurance industry. Insurers would no longer be permitted to exclude people because of preexisting medical conditions or to drop policyholders if they developed expensive illnesses. (They would, however, be permitted to charge those nearing Medicare age up to three times as much as younger customers.) Insurance companies would also be required to spend at least 80 percent of their premiums on medical services, instead of diverting over 20 percent to profits and overhead.

Financing the increased coverage would come from four main sources. First, the payroll tax that supports Medicare was to be increased for individuals who earn more than \$200,000 per year or families that earn over \$250,000 per year. Second, these same high earners would pay a 3.8 percent tax on unearned income, such as dividends or capital gains. Third, payments to Medicare Advantage plans would be reduced; these are government-supported private plans chosen by about a quarter of Medicare beneficiaries because they usually offer a broader package of benefits. The government had paid Medicare Advantage plans about 14 percent more than it would cost to cover the same people in ordinary Medicare. Fourth, beginning in 2018, there would be an excise tax on high-cost policies. There were also to be unspecified reductions in Medicare payments to hospitals and other health facilities, as well as a variety

Brendan Smialowski/The New York Times/Redux



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of small fees levied on health industry companies.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, these new funding sources, taken together, would more than cover the cost of the legislation to the federal budget. But costs to the private sector—businesses and individuals—were not addressed in the Congressional Budget Office analysis, nor was there any consideration of the growth in costs. The analysis was based on extremely optimistic assumptions.

During the five years since then, there have been a series of delays and setbacks. In 2012, the Supreme Court decided that while the mandate to purchase insurance was constitutional, the requirement that states expand their Medicaid rolls was not. As a result, even though the federal government would pay virtually all of the additional costs, twenty-two states have refused the offer, leaving millions of people uninsured who would otherwise be covered by Medicaid.

In addition, thirty-six states have refused to set up state shopping exchanges, so that their residents have to rely instead on the federal exchange, created as a backup, to buy subsidized insurance. But that, too, is now before the Supreme Court, because of the implausible claim that the wording in one part of the law means that only state exchanges may offer subsidies.* (A decision on that will probably come at the end of the Court term.) Payments to Medicare Advantage plans are still higher than costs for comparable patients in traditional Medicare. And finally, there have been delays in implementation for both businesses and individuals, partly as a result of the disastrous 2013 rollout of the Obamacare websites—something Brill describes well. Over the past few years, the rate of cost inflation in health care has slowed somewhat; whether as a result of Obamacare or the recession is unclear, but it is still higher than the general inflation rate.

Assuming the recalcitrant states come around and all parts of the law eventually go into effect, what are we to make of it? Brill is pessimistic, and so am I. He well describes the two principal causes of escalating costs in our current system: first, the overuse of exorbitantly priced tests and procedures by entrepreneurial providers responding to a fee-for-service payment system that rewards such overuse, and second, the existence of hundreds of private insurance companies that generate huge overhead costs throughout the system, much of which supports or counters bureaucratic efforts to avoid or minimize payments for patients' care. Obviously, any health system reform must do something about these two drivers of cost inflation.

But Obamacare does very little about either of them. First, it does not change the entrepreneurial delivery system. Care will still be provided in for-profit facilities or nonprofit facilities that behave the same way, and doctors will still be paid largely on a fee-for-service basis, and the fees will still be skewed to reward highly paid specialists for prescribing as many procedures

as possible. There is some language in the legislation about determining cost-effective practice and setting up demonstration projects that would pay doctors differently, but nothing specific. Moreover, the law actually forbids tying fees to findings from comparative effectiveness research. There has been an increase in the establishment of accountable care organizations (ACOs) that are paid a yearly fee to cover all a patient's medical needs, but while encouraged, ACOs are not required by the law.

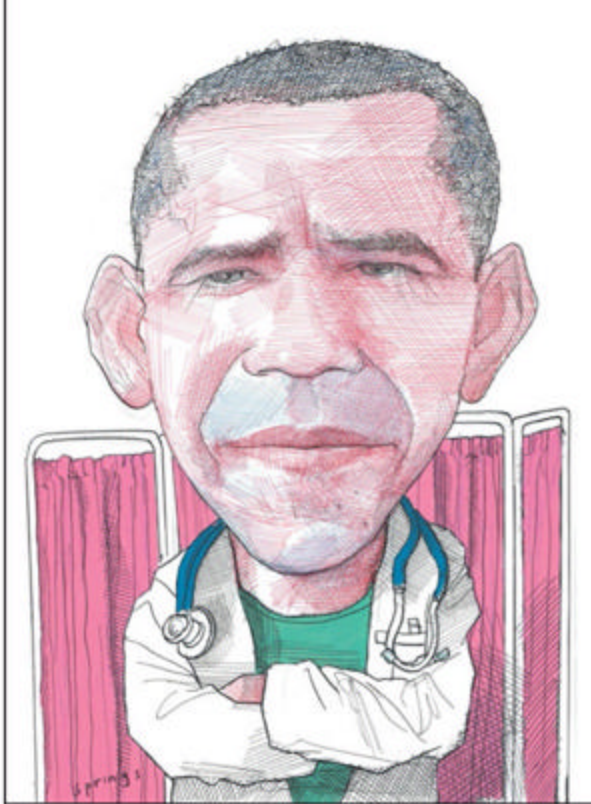
Second, private insurance companies will still be able to set their own premium prices, and since the legislation will pour more money and customers into the insurance industry, it amounts to a recipe for inflation. Some regulations to prohibit abuses can be circumvented, and as an official in the insurers' trade association once told me, any adverse effect on the companies' bottom line can always be offset by raising premiums. Right-wing critics have referred to the law as a "government takeover," but it's actually much closer to a "corporate takeover."

In 2006, my state of Massachusetts enacted legislation that closely resembles the new federal law and indeed served as its template. The Massachusetts law was originally promoted as a way to contain costs as well as expand coverage; the theory was that as people became insured, they would seek care from primary care physicians instead of in more expensive emergency rooms. But as costs continued to grow rapidly, the rationale changed. The new story is that the intention all along was just to get everyone insured and deal with costs later. Almost all Massachusetts residents now have health insurance, but premiums, deductibles, and copayments have increased, and some people have found they cannot afford to use their insurance. Massachusetts now spends more per capita on health care than any other state, and health spending consumes over half the current state budget, at the expense of nearly every other state function—including education, public safety, human services, and infrastructure. Clearly, while it's possible to expand access to health insurance by pouring money into a wasteful system, eventually the costs are shifted to patients in one way or another, and other important social goods are neglected.

Practically every serious economic analysis of the American health system has concluded that the most efficient way to provide care to everyone is through some form of single-payer system, such as Medicare for all, and that any other approach will eventually be unsupportable. Why, then, was a single-payer system excluded from consideration and its proponents almost entirely barred from the discussion during the year Obamacare was written? That rejection can only reflect the enormous power of the health industry, which Brill reminds us has the largest lobby in Washington, D.C., and gave millions in campaign contributions to the key legislators. Indeed, Senator Baucus received more money from the health industry that year than anyone else in Congress.

Much of the public opposes Obamacare, and it is often claimed that their opposition reflects a philosophic antipathy toward big government. While that explanation may be partly true, I think it's largely a canard promulgated by the health industries and repeated by much of the media. The problem for most people, I suspect, is not the size of government, but the belief that government often does not work for their benefit, and instead serves special interests. I have no doubt that if instead of this reform, the plan had been to extend Medicare to everyone, most of the public would have been pleased. Polls have consistently shown that a majority of Americans favor such a system;

Barack Obama



the percentages vary according to the framing of the question, but they are almost always well above 50 percent.

Medicare is a government-administered single-payer system similar to Canada's. It's the most popular part of the US system, because it covers nearly everyone over the age of sixty-five for the same package of benefits, no matter what their medical condition; many sixty-four-year-olds can hardly wait to be sixty-five, so that they can get on Medicare. I've advocated gradually extending Medicare to the entire population by dropping the qualifying age one decade at a time—starting with age fifty-five. However, Medicare uses the same entrepreneurial providers as the private system, and its expenditures are rising almost as rapidly. Therefore, we would need to convert to a nonprofit delivery system, and we would need to stop preferentially rewarding specialists whose practice consists mainly of procedures. Paying doctors by salary makes the most sense.

Brill has a very different proposal. First, he documents the major responsibility of "brand-name" hospital conglomerates, such as New York-Presbyterian, for driving up health costs. They do so by their relentless expansion to push out competitors, their acquisition of large networks of physicians and outpatient facilities to feed them, the breathtaking prices they command from insurers that dare not refuse, their lush operating profits of on average about 12 percent (whether they are technically nonprofit or not), and

their heartless pursuit of full payment from uninsured patients even while they pay their executives multimillion-dollar salaries.

Brill then comes up with this solution to our health care problems:

Let these guys [i.e., the hospitals] loose. Give the most ambitious, expansion-minded foxes responsible for the chargemaster even more free rein to run the henhouse—but with lots of conditions.

His notion is that the hospitals would provide one-stop shopping for employers or individual customers, including acting as their own insurers. A customer would simply sign up at, say, New York-Presbyterian, which would provide everything for a set price; no more fee-for-service. Customers would buy the brand, and everything else would follow.

But, says Brill, there would have to be seven conditions to force these hospital conglomerates to behave better than they do now. First, "that any market have at least two of these big, fully integrated provider-insurance company players." If there were only one, its profits should be controlled like a public utility. Second, whether oligopoly or monopoly, operating profits would be capped "at, say, 8 percent a year."

Third, there would be "a cap on the total salary and bonus paid to any hospital employee who does not practice medicine full-time of sixty times the amount paid to the lowest salaried full-time doctor, typically a first-year resident." At the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, where starting residents make \$52,000, that would be \$3.12 million.

Fourth, there would have to be a "streamlined appeals process" for patients who felt they had been denied adequate care.

Fifth, the CEOs of these hospitals would have to be physicians who had practiced medicine for a minimum number of years.

Sixth, the hospitals would have to insure a minimum percentage of "Medicaid patients at a stipulated discount." And seventh:

These regulated oligopolies would be required to charge any uninsured patients no more than they charge any competing insurance companies whose insurance they accept, or a price based on their regulated profit margin if they don't accept other insurance.

That's quite a list. Brill ends by pronouncing his dream of a system "certainly more realistic than pining for a public single-payer system that is never going to happen." I disagree. The foxes out there now would simply not accept such constraints. After all, their diet is hens.

Shortly after the appearance of his *Time* article, Brill was diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm that required open-heart surgery, which was successfully performed at New York-Presbyterian Hospital (at a charge of over \$190,000). As a result, he became enamored (there is no other word) with the hospi-

*See David Cole, "Can They Crush Obamacare?," *The New York Review*, March 19, 2015.

tal and its CEO, Steven Corwin, a heart surgeon. He also interviewed other physician-CEOs of large hospital conglomerates, including Delos “Toby” Cosgrove of Cleveland Clinic and Gary Gottlieb of Partners HealthCare in Boston. With very little reason other than their words, he decided that they were inherently less avaricious than other hospital CEOs. At one point, he asks rhetorically whether CEOs should “have all that power” that his hypothetical system would give them, and answers:

That’s where doctor-leaders like Corwin, Steele [Glenn Steele of Geisinger Health System], Gottlieb, and Cosgrove come in.... Allow doctor-leaders to create great brands that both insure consumers for their medical costs and provide medical care.

His high regard for New York–Presbyterian, and by extension similar institutions, is at odds with his hardheaded finding that while the US spends more on health than other developed countries, that does not buy it better health outcomes. He nevertheless seems to believe that the biggest, richest “brands” provide better care. Perhaps it helped that he got good care in one of them. But there is no reason to believe that his surgery would not have gone equally well with another surgeon at another hospital. Attempts to gauge quality, as, for example, by state tallies of surgical outcomes, which he reviewed to evaluate his surgeon, are necessarily crude and can be gamed, and Brill is too accepting of them.

Similarly, while I agree that hospital CEOs should be physicians, I don’t see any evidence that they are less vulnerable to the drive to maximize profits. The doctor-leaders Brill interviewed claimed that their high prices were necessary to cover their efforts to improve quality, but their operating profits after those expenditures are still as high as hospitals without doctor-leaders, and they are evidently no more magnanimous to uninsured patients.

Brill’s view that hospital conglomerates should serve as their own insurers also seems at odds with his earlier analysis. In the system he envisions, he wants insurers and providers to be on the same team, so that their interests are aligned. But elsewhere in the book, he points out that insurers are the only brake on providers’ rising prices. He writes that in 2009 insurers’ “tight profit margins were dwarfed by those of the drug companies, the device makers, and even the purportedly nonprofit hospitals.” He argues that insurers “are the only industry players who, however unsympathetic, are on the customer and taxpayer side of the divide. Like us, they *buy* health care.” It’s not clear to me that insurers are on the customer side of the divide, but it’s true that in our fragmented, uncoordinated system, there is some advantage to not having interests aligned. Let’s look at how those interests line up now.

Employers and insurers, including government insurers, have every incentive to stint on care. The best way to do that is to refuse to insure high-risk people at all or to put a cap on their coverage (something that Obamacare is designed to prevent), to shift costs to pa-

tients at the point of service by increasing deductibles and copayments, and to limit the benefit package. In contrast, hospitals and other facilities have every incentive to expand, so that they’re in a better position to bargain with insurers for higher prices. Brill tells us that New York–Presbyterian Hospital gave his insurer, UnitedHealthcare, a discount on prices of only 12 percent, but UnitedHealthcare could demand discounts of 30 to 60 percent from other hospitals.

For the most part, physicians just want to maintain their income, even as their influence wanes. Increasingly, as the struggle between insurers and hospital conglomerates grows, they are becoming absorbed by one or another of these two forces. But they are still paid mainly by fee-for-service, and those fees are skewed to reward tests and procedures. Procedure-oriented specialists thus have every incentive to do as many of them as possible, particularly when unit prices are controlled. In his disturbing new book, *Doctored: The Disillusionment of an American Physician*, Sandeep Jauhar describes cross-referrals among friendly colleagues simply to increase all their incomes.²

Note that none of these three disparate incentives I have described is designed to improve patients’ health. Until they are aligned to do that, and not just to serve the interests of parts of the system, we should be wary of aligning them. Which of them, after all, would we choose to win out? To the extent that they now cancel one another out, eliminating one might make matters even worse.

The fundamental issue in the US health system is costs. After all, if money were no object, everyone could have all the health care he or she could possibly need or want. But money is an object, and sadly, the Affordable Care Act is a misnomer, because it’s not really affordable except in the short run. Yes, it has expanded access, but the costs will not be sustainable—unless deductibles and copayments are greatly increased and benefits cut. That is happening now, particularly in the private sector, where employers are also capping their contributions to health insurance.

The problem is that Obamacare attempted to reform the system, while retaining the private insurance industry and the profit-driven delivery system with all its distortions and waste. Obamacare even made the private insurance companies the linchpin of the reform, providing them with millions more publicly subsidized customers. At the time Obamacare was enacted, its supporters argued that anything else was politically unrealistic. In view of our industry-friendly politics, that may have been so, but that does not mean that Obamacare can work. It’s unrealistic for different reasons.

Until we begin to treat health care as a social good instead of a market commodity, there is simply no way to make health care universal, comprehensive, and affordable. Brill’s book is a superb, even gripping, description of the American health system and the creation of Obamacare, but he is misguided in his recommendation for reform by turning over the administration of the health care system to hospitals. The last thing we need is more foxes guarding the henhouse. □

²Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

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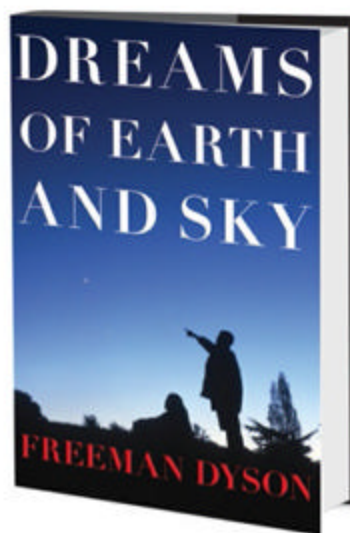
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The Pope Who Tried

Alexander Stille

The Pope and Mussolini: The Secret History of Pius XI and the Rise of Fascism in Europe by David I. Kertzer. Random House, 549 pp., \$32.00; \$20.00 (paper)

During the past fifty years, most of the debate on the Catholic Church's relationship with fascism has focused on the wartime period and the Vatican's response to the Holocaust. Did the virtual silence of Pius XII, who became pope in early 1939, about the mistreatment and extermination of Europe's Jews facilitate Hitler's Final Solution, as his critics insist, or was it, as Pius's defenders maintain, a heroic act of self-discipline that prevented Nazi reprisals against the many thousands of Catholic institutions that were secretly hiding and helping Jews? The debate, as Pius XII inches his way toward sainthood, has become somewhat sterile since it depends partly on difficult-to-prove arguments about what might have happened had he spoken out.

One of the many virtues of David Kertzer's *The Pope and Mussolini* is that it reframes the discussion by shifting attention away from World War II and looking closely at the papacy of Pius XII's predecessor, Pius XI, who became pope in 1922, the year that Benito Mussolini came to power, and died in early 1939, several months before Hitler invaded Poland. Taking advantage of the gradual opening of Vatican archives, Kertzer offers us a much more detailed portrait of the inner workings of the Vatican in this period. The many revelatory incidents, documents, and scenes he adds to the story are bound to reanimate the older debate on Pius XII.

When Mussolini seized power in his so-called March on Rome in October 1922, Achille Ratti, a scholarly librarian and former archbishop of Milan, had only recently become Pope Pius XI. The Catholic Church had not been particularly supportive of fascism during its rise. Mussolini, after all, had started out his career as an outspoken atheist and anticlerical firebrand. The Church supported its own specifically Catholic party, the Partito Popolare, or Popular Party, which competed with both the Socialists and the Fascists.

To the pope's surprise, on taking power Mussolini immediately began a concerted campaign to win the Church's support. He used his first speech to Parliament to articulate his vision of a Fascist society that placed the Church at the center of Italian life: the Fascist Party would be the unquestioned authority in political life and the Church would be restored to its primacy over the spiritual life of the nation. Mussolini followed up his speech with a series of concrete actions: crucifixes were placed in every public school classroom, courtroom, and hospital room; insulting a priest or disparaging the Catholic religion was made a criminal offense; Catholicism became a required subject in public schools; and considerable state funds were spent on priests' salaries, as well as Church-run schools overseas.

This represented a remarkable departure—not just for Mussolini but for Italy. The battle to create a united Ital-

ian state had been fought, in part, at the expense of Church power, and resulted in the end of the pope's temporal rule over Rome and much of central Italy. It took the popes decades to realize that Italy was a permanent reality that they needed to accept. Mussolini offered them the possibility of doing so on highly favorable terms. Almost immediately he began secret negotiations for a treaty between the Vatican and the Italian state. This concordat, known as the Lateran Treaty, was signed in 1929; it made Catholicism Italy's state religion and compensated the Church for its lost territories with a generous finan-



Monsignor Francesco Borgongini-Duca, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, Francesco Pacelli, Benito Mussolini, and Dino Grandi at the signing of the Lateran Treaty between Italy and the Vatican, February 1929

cial settlement. Pius XI was so pleased with the treaty that he referred to Mussolini as the "man sent by providence."

The general outlines of this story have always been matters of public record, but Kertzer's book deepens and alters our understanding considerably. The portrait that emerges from it suggests a much more organic and symbiotic relationship between the Church and fascism. Rather than seeing the Church as having passively accepted fascism as a *fait accompli*, Kertzer sees it as having provided fundamental support to Mussolini in his consolidation of power and the establishment of dictatorship in Italy.

The Vatican's first and perhaps most important contribution was the dismantling of the Popular Party, which in the first years of fascism remained one of the greatest obstacles to dictatorial rule. As Mussolini began to negotiate the Lateran Treaty, he made it clear that he considered it an intolerable contradiction for the Church to enter into a partnership with his regime while at the same time fielding an opposition party that criticized it. Just eight months after the March on Rome, Pius XI forced Father Luigi Sturzo, the founder of the Popular Party, to resign as party secretary.

Kertzer writes that Pius XI may have had a crucial part in supporting Mussolini at a moment when he might well have fallen from power. In 1924, Italy held elections that were badly marred by violence, intimidation, and fraud. Not surprisingly, the Fascists obtained a

majority, but the Popular Party and the Socialists, braving impossible conditions, held on to significant minorities. When the Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti denounced the conduct and outcome of the elections, he was kidnapped and murdered in downtown Rome. The Matteotti killing shocked the Italian middle and upper-middle classes, who suddenly began to rethink their support of fascism. As the investigation unfolded, the opposition suddenly regained vigor. Mussolini went into a kind of personal crisis, seeming to regard his own resignation as inevitable. Even pillars of the Italian establish-

ment like the Milan newspaper *Corriere della Sera* now called on him to step down. What was left of the Popular Party, the Catholic party, was also calling for a new government. This would almost certainly have required a coalition between the Catholics and the Socialists.

The Vatican, instead, decided to support Mussolini. An internal political briefing from this period stated:

Catholics could only think with terror of what might happen in Italy if the Honorable Mussolini's government were to fall perhaps to an insurrection by subversive forces and so they have every interest in supporting it.

Pius XI, through his personal emissary, Father Pietro Tacchi Venturi, sent Mussolini a private message of encouragement and solidarity. On a more concrete level, the pope also silenced Father Sturzo, who although no longer the head of the Popular Party remained a prominent public figure denouncing fascism. Sturzo was ordered to stop publishing his views and reluctantly agreed to leave Italy.

Without a unified opposition, the crisis passed and Mussolini regained his footing. "If Mussolini was not deposed as a result of the Matteotti crisis," Kertzer writes,

it was because the opposition—not least due to the pope's constant efforts to undermine any possible alliance to put an end to Fascist rule—failed to offer a credible alternative. Lacking this alternative,

neither the king nor the army was willing to act.

In 1926, all opposition parties were forced to dissolve, including, of course, the Popular Party, which the pope accepted without difficulty. As Father Sturzo wrote in protest, the pope was getting rid of the one party "that is truly inspired by Christian principles of civil life and... today serves to limit... the arbitrary rule of the dictatorship."

It is perhaps surprising to some today that the pope would not have been more concerned about killing off Italy's Catholic party and its democracy as well. But for the Vatican, democracy was hardly a positive value and it had only reluctantly allowed the creation of the Popular Party in 1919. After all, the movement toward parliamentary democracy in modern Europe had gone hand in hand with a series of other movements calling for reforms that would break the Church's power in much of European society: freedom of speech, individual rights, separation of church and state, public secular education, the confiscation of Church lands, and equal rights for other religions or even those who held no faith at all.

With the Lateran pact, both the Vatican and the Fascist regime saw themselves as having entered into a form of partnership. The Vatican turned to Mussolini to ban books the Church found offensive and to prevent Protestants from trying to spread their faith. In return, Mussolini expected the Church to support the dictatorship. Having done away with opposition political parties, fascism would instead hold public referendums in which voters were asked to vote yes for the regime and for a preselected slate of candidates for Parliament. Before the first referendum in 1929, the pope, as Kertzer shows, insisted on vetting the potential candidates, rejected some three quarters of them as insufficiently Catholic, and demanded a new list that was "free from any tie with Freemasonry, with Judaism and, in short, with any of the anticlerical parties."

The pope considered this extraordinary request a fulfillment of the Lateran Treaty. As a Vatican letter to Mussolini explained:

In this way the Duce will place... the most beautiful and necessary crown atop the great work of the treaty and the concordat. He will show one more time that he is (in conformity with what His Holiness recently called him) the Man sent by Providence.

When the regime complied, Italy's priests literally led their congregations to the ballot boxes.

It is shocking to see the Vatican insisting on the exclusion of Jews from political life nearly ten years before the Fascist regime introduced anti-Semitic legislation, in 1938. In what are likely to be the most controversial parts of Kertzer's book, he shows that some elements of the Vatican were urging fascism toward anti-Semitism well in advance of its own decision to make a

public issue of race. The Jesuit father Pietro Tacchi Venturi, Pius XI's emissary to Mussolini, a man who thus had the ear of both the pope and the dictator, was a rabid anti-Semite who appears to have firmly believed that "the worldwide Jewish-Masonic plutocracy" was the Church's greatest enemy. As Kertzer writes:

In September 1926 Tacchi Venturi gave the Duce a recently published fifteen-page pamphlet, *Zionism and Catholicism*, which had been dedicated to the Jesuit himself. The pamphlet, after recalling that God condemned the Jews to wander the earth and cursed them for rejecting Jesus, turned to the more immediate dangers the Jews posed. "No one can doubt," its author warned, "the Jewish sect's formidable, diabolical, fatal activity throughout the world."

There is no indication that the Duce paid much attention to the pamphlet or that it reflected the views of the pope. But Tacchi Venturi made no secret of his views, and they obviously didn't diminish his standing as one of the pope's most trusted advisers. Belief in the Jewish conspiracy was a widely held and entirely respectable position in the Catholic Church of the 1920s and 1930s. On reading Kertzer's book, one would have to say that some form of anti-Semitism—the tendency to regard Jews as a troublesome minority fundamentally hostile to the Church—was the norm at the highest levels of the Vatican in the 1930s.

The intensity of this belief varied considerably, moving along a spectrum from mild to virulent anti-Semitism. Pius XI was on the milder end. He recalled with fondness his days in Milan when he received Hebrew lessons from a local rabbi to help him with his Bible studies. He regarded anti-Semitic legislation in Italy, where Jews were a mere one in a thousand of the population, as unnecessary, but he accepted that some countries where Jews were far more numerous might need to take measures to avoid Jewish "dominance." When he was papal nuncio to Poland, he warned that much of the disorder that followed World War I was the result of the Poles falling

into the clutches of the evil influences that are laying a trap for them and threatening them.... One of the most evil and strongest influences that is felt here, perhaps the strongest and the most evil, is that of the Jews.

In 1928, Pius XI endorsed the decision of the Vatican's Holy Office (the successor to the Inquisition) to suppress the Catholic organization called the Friends of Israel. Although devoted to the eventual goal of converting the Jews, the group called for the Church to treat the Jews with greater respect and sympathy. Its members included thousands of priests, 278 bishops, and nineteen cardinals.

The group evidently went too far when it called on the Church to abandon the tradition of referring to Jews as Christ-killers and to give up the traditional Easter prayer referring to the "perfidious Jews." Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val, the head of the Holy Of-

fice, a former Vatican secretary of state and one of the most powerful cardinals in Rome, insisted that the Friends of Israel had been unwitting tools of the Jews' plan to "penetrate everywhere in modern society...to reconstitute the reign of Israel in opposition to the Christ and his Church." After meeting with Pius XI, Merry del Val reported that the pope shared his view that "behind the Friends of Israel one finds the hand and the inspiration of the Jews themselves."

One of the most valuable achievements of Kertzer's book is that it creates an institutional portrait of the Vatican. While it deepens our understanding of individual historical figures—Pius XI, but also his secretary of state, Eugenio Pacelli, who became



Pope Pius XI at the Vatican

Pius XII—it shows extremely well that even in an autocratic organization like the Vatican, the pope does not always act alone. There is a permanent bureaucracy with deep institutional biases and tendencies that can often shape and mold papal action.

Kertzer's evidence makes it clear that it became almost irrelevant whether Pius XI was or wasn't anti-Semitic or pro-fascist. He was surrounded by a powerful group at the Vatican who shared authoritarian, antidemocratic political views and whose thought was deeply permeated—to varying degrees—by anti-Semitism.

Perhaps the most dramatic account in *The Pope and Mussolini* is the story of how, during the last years of Pius XI's papacy, he apparently underwent a transformation: he soured on fascism and became disillusioned with Mussolini and disgusted by Hitler. Unlike his principal advisers, he seems to have gradually understood that fascism was not just another conservative movement but a dangerous pagan ideology that was deeply at odds with Christianity. "Tell Signor Mussolini in my name," the pope told the Italian ambassador to the Holy See in 1932, "that I do not like his attempts at trying to become a quasi-divinity and it is not doing him any good either.... Sooner or later people end up smashing their idols."

During these years the Vatican bureaucracy worked hard to suppress, weaken, water down, or quash virtually all the pope's criticism of Mussolini or Hitler in order to smooth over or avoid diplomatic conflict. In 1935, when Italy

invaded Ethiopia, Pius XI denounced it as an "unjust war," "unspeakably horrible" in front of a group of religious nurses who had come for a papal audience.

In Rome, the curia set about adulterating the pope's remarks so as to obfuscate their real meaning when they appeared in *L'Osservatore romano*. "Here I cut a word, there I add another," recalled Domenico Tardini, a high-level official in the Vatican secretary of state's office, noted proudly in his diary. "Here I modify a sentence, there I erase another. In short, with a subtle and methodical effort we succeed in greatly softening the rawness of the papal thought."

Similarly, when *America*, an influential Jesuit magazine in the US, published a strong criticism of Italy's war in Ethiopia, the Italian government went behind the pope's back by protesting to Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, the general superior of the Jesuit Order, a man known for his pro-fascist leanings and virulent anti-Semitism. Ledóchowski obliged by replacing *America's* anti-fascist editor with one who supported the regime.

Pius XI was mortified that Mussolini invited Hitler to Rome in May 1938 and turned the entire city into a welcoming platform for the author of *Mein Kampf*, plastering the city of the popes with swastikas. Pius, in a very clear gesture, left Rome during Hitler's visit and closed the Vatican Museums, preferring to avoid what he called "the apotheosis of Signor Hitler, the greatest enemy that Christ and the Church have had in modern times."

And when, during the summer of 1938, it became clear that Mussolini was ready to follow Hitler in adopting an official policy of biological anti-Semitism, the pope was scathing. He told a group of students about the dangers of "exaggerated nationalism," insisting on the essential unity of the human race and lamenting Mussolini's aping of Hitler. "One can ask how it is that Italy, unfortunately, felt the need to go and imitate Germany."

Terrified by the prospect of a major public condemnation of Mussolini's new racial policy, the regime asked for the help of Father Ledóchowski, who as head of the Jesuits was one of the most powerful figures in the Church. "I went to see the general of the Jesuits," Italian ambassador Pignatti later explained, "because in the past...he did not hide from me his implacable loathing for the Jews, whom he believes are the origin of all the ills that afflict Europe."

Ledóchowski described in letters what he regarded as the feelings of desperation within the Vatican. The closest advisers of Pope Pius XI, he wrote, had come to regard him as in dangerous decline, making ill-advised remarks without consulting them. "Cardinal Pacelli was at his wit's end: 'The pope no longer listens to him as he once did. He carefully hides his plans from him and does not tell him about the speeches he will give.'"

As a result, the pope's advisers were trying to silence him. When he told a group of Belgian Catholics, "Anti-Semitism is inadmissible. Spiritually we are all Semites," the Vatican made sure that those remarks were missing from the account of the pope's remarks in *L'Osservatore romano*. Kertzer attributes the censorship of the pope to Cardinal Pacelli, who as secretary of

state was effectively running the Vatican during Pius XI's final illness.

While old and very sick, Pius XI was clearly thinking seriously about the problem of race and came across a book called *Interracial Justice*, by an American Jesuit named John LaFarge, who had worked with African-American congregations during his ministry. The pope was struck by LaFarge's call for racial tolerance and asked him to write an encyclical on the subject. "Say simply what you would say if you yourself were pope," he said. But LaFarge's superior, Jesuit General Ledóchowski, made sure that this did not happen. He appointed two more experienced theologians (whose views were much closer to his own) to help LaFarge draft the encyclical. Rather than forward it to the pope, Ledóchowski sat on it for several months, cutting and modifying, until he produced a much shorter draft that was very far in spirit from LaFarge's *Interracial Justice* but that kept some of the original intent and was called "On the Unity of Humankind." Ledóchowski did not pass on this document to the pope until he was just weeks from death and too sick to do anything with it.

During these same months, Vatican officials succeeded in preventing a break with Mussolini's government over the racial laws that were passed in the fall of 1938. The Church's main objection was to the laws' biological definition of race, which did not exempt Jewish converts to Catholicism, mixed marriages between Jews and Catholics, or their children. But it was difficult for the Church to object to the overall message of the racial laws, since after all, the regime, as the Fascist press enjoyed pointing out, was not doing anything that the Church had not done for centuries and continued to advocate in some of its most authoritative publications.

In May 1937, more than a year before the passage of the racial laws, the Jesuit magazine *La Civiltà cattolica* published an article on "The Jewish Question and Zionism," making its point of view clear from the start: "It is an evident fact that the Jews are a disruptive element due to their spirit of domination and their preponderance in revolutionary movements." A year later, precisely when the regime was beginning to prepare its own racial laws, *La Civiltà cattolica* published a long, enthusiastic article on newly introduced anti-Semitic legislation in Hungary. "In Hungary," the journal explained,

the Jews have no single organization engaged in any systematic common action. The instinctive and irrepressible solidarity of their nation is enough to have them make common cause in putting into action their messianic craving for world domination.

As Kertzer writes:

Hungarian Catholics' anti-Semitism was not of the "vulgar, fanatic" kind, much less "racist," but "a movement of defense of national traditions and of true freedom and independence of the Hungarian people."

Thus, despite his evolving thoughts on racism, Pius XI was not really able to mount a comprehensive critique of the racial laws, limiting himself to a rather

weak, general plea for Christian mercy. “We recognize,” said Pius, “that it is up to the nation’s government to take those opportune measures in this matter in defense of its legitimate interests and it is Our intention not to interfere with them.” But according to Kertzer, “the pope felt duty-bound to appeal to Mussolini’s ‘Christian sense’ and warn him ‘against any type of measures that were inhumane and unchristian.’”

In a memo the Fascist government assured the Vatican that

the Jews, in a word, can be sure that they will not be subjected to treatment worse than that which was accorded them for centuries and centuries by the popes who hosted them in the Eternal City and in the lands of their temporal domain.

Despite his serious misgivings over the fate of converted Jews, Pius XI eventually accepted the compromise worked out by his senior advisers, which was really no compromise at all: all Jews, including converted Jews, were subject to the legislation.

During the final months of his life, Pope Pius XI, despite being near death, worked feverishly on an address he hoped to give to the Italian bishops on the tenth anniversary of the Lateran Treaty, scheduled for March 1939. He hoped, Kertzer shows, to use the occasion to offer a tough criticism of the regime and the ways it had violated the concordat with the Vatican.

Pius XI felt strongly enough about this speech that he insisted on having copies of it printed up in case he was not well enough to deliver it. Among

other things it contained a reference to “all peoples, all the nations, all the races, all joined together and all of the same blood in the common link of the great human family.” He ended up dying a few weeks before the scheduled meeting with the bishops.

Rumors began to reach both Mussolini and his foreign minister and son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano, who had good informants inside the Vatican, about the existence of an explosive document the pope had left behind. As Kertzer writes:

Learning of Mussolini’s concern, Pacelli moved quickly. On February 15 he ordered the pope’s secretary to gather up all written material the pope had produced in preparing his address. He also told the Vatican printing office to destroy all

copies of the speech it had printed, copies that Pius had intended to give the bishops. The vice director of the office gave his assurance that he would personally destroy them, so that “not a comma” remained.

Pacelli acted two days after learning of Ciano’s worries that the text of the pope’s speech might get out. Pacelli also took the material that Ledóchowski had sent the pope three weeks earlier—what has since come to be known as the “secret encyclical” against racism—eager to ensure that no one else would see it. The words the pope had so painstakingly prepared in the last days of his life would never be seen as long as Pacelli lived.

It’s Still a Scandal!

Adam Thirlwell

**The Most Dangerous Book:
The Battle for James Joyce’s *Ulysses***
by Kevin Birmingham.
Penguin, 417 pp., \$29.95

1.

One small scene from the annals of heroic modernism is the moment when, in the winter of 1921, the French novelist and critic Valéry Larbaud gave the world’s first-ever talk on James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses*, at Shakespeare & Company, an Anglophone bookstore and lending library in Paris, run by a young American woman called Sylvia Beach. The book had still not been published—and Joyce was not well known. No critic had examined his work in depth, and not many of even the most literary people in England or America had heard of him. But in the last two or three years, Larbaud explained, Joyce had acquired an “extraordinary notoriety”—he had become the literary equal of Freud or Einstein. His name was an alluring rumor. Those who had read his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and especially those who had managed to read his new novel *Ulysses*, as serialized in the New York magazine *The Little Review*, all agreed.

And yet, Larbaud had to admit:

If you ask a member of the (American) Society for the Suppression of Vice: “Who is James Joyce?” you will receive the following reply: “He is an Irishman who has written a pornographic work called *Ulysses* which we have successfully prosecuted when it appeared in the *Little Review* in New York.”

For what had happened to Flaubert and Baudelaire, said Larbaud, had happened to Joyce. His art had been deemed obscene. Larbaud’s proposal, therefore, was to “try to describe the work of James Joyce as precisely as possible.” And then he began his lecture, using notes prepared by Joyce himself.

“All men should ‘Unite to give praise to Ulysses’; those who will not, may



James Joyce, circa 1922

content themselves with a place in the lower intellectual orders,” wrote Ezra Pound a few months later, after the novel was finally published—by Shakespeare & Company, in its first venture as a publishing house. But you can only truly praise something you understand, and no one was quite certain what *Ulysses* was. Joyce’s novel created a vast transatlantic tremor of anxiety. Pound called it a “super-novel,” and even Joyce had problems of definition. In a letter to another of his supervised interpreters, Carlo Linati, he called it an “epic,” an “encyclopedia,” and most charmingly a “*maledettissimo romanzo*” (fucking novelosaurus). Only the gargantuan proportions were sure.

Should it have been so difficult? This novel has a story, after all. The date is June 16, 1904. The setting is Dublin.

And the hero is Leopold Bloom—a devoted husband to his wife Molly, with whom he has one daughter. Jewish by race, Christian by baptism, and atheist by inclination, Bloom is really a believer in reason and science: he is the everyman of the democratic twentieth century. He works in the newspaper world as an advertising salesman. Calmly he goes about his business on this sunny day in June—cooking breakfast, attending a funeral, having lunch, negotiating with a client, sitting on the beach—wandering in Dublin, just as Ulysses once wandered in the Mediterranean during his long journey home.

The difference is that this Ulysses is avoiding his home: for he knows that Molly has an appointment that afternoon with the dapper Blazes Boylan—ostensibly to discuss a sing-

ing tour, but probably to consummate their flirtation. And so he pauses in pubs and bars, encountering a cast of kibitzers and schlemiels that includes, in particular, Stephen Dedalus, student of philosophy, with dreams of literary glory, whom the avant-garde reader would remember from *A Portrait of the Artist*, just as that reader would recognize many characters from *Dubliners*, Joyce’s collection of short stories.

It’s true that a story that takes place over one day, without the usual sequence of grand events, was not an obvious genre. But this was the new avant-garde invention. It was not so arcane. As early as 1914, Ezra Pound had praised the stories in *Dubliners* precisely for this refusal of plot: “Life for the most part does not happen in neat little diagrams and nothing is more tiresome than the continual pretence that it does.” But then, the absence of plot was not the only problem. There was also the craziness of the technique.

Joyce’s novel employed the largest range of styles—a series of rapid innovations—ever seen in a single novel. Its first impression on the startled reader was a kind of intellectual blur. Most notorious was Joyce’s lavish use of the technique that became known, following Larbaud’s lecture, as *interior monologue*. This kind of thing:

A kidney oozed bloodgouts on the willowpatterned dish: the last. He stood by the nextdoor girl at the counter. Would she buy it too, calling the items from a slip in her hand. Chapped: washing soda. And a pound and a half of Denny’s sausages. His eyes rested on her vigorous hips. Woods his name is. Wonder what he does. Wife is oldish. New blood. No followers allowed.

All the usual demarcations—between dialogue and thought and description—were now jumbled. (Joyce appropriated the technique from a minor nineteenth-century novel, *Les Lauriers sont coupés*, by Édouard Du-

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

jardin.) However, the technique could be gradually understood by the patient reader. True, one episode, set in a newspaper office, was interrupted with headlines, and a later episode, in a saloon bar, where songs were being solemnly recited, came with its own overture, but the committed reader could cope. Late in this day's afternoon, however, a flamboyant range of styles took over: sports journalism, sentimental fiction, and even a sequential historical pastiche of English prose style. "I understand that you may begin to regard the various styles of the episodes with dismay," Joyce wrote to Harriet Shaw Weaver, his most devoted patron and editor of *The Egoist*, which had serialized *Portrait*,

and prefer the initial style much as the wanderer did who longed for the rock of Ithaca. But in the compass of one day to compress all these wanderings and clothe them in the form of this day is for me only possible by such variation which, I beg you to believe, is not capricious.

And this manic variation culminated in a final chapter where Bloom's wife Molly, lying in bed, thinks to herself, with almost no punctuation, in a free flow of domestic, dirty associations: "I know every turn in him Ill tighten my bottom well and let out a few smutty words smellrump or lick my shit..." This was the extra problem with *Ulysses*. Joyce's stylistic one-man band included a linguistic obscenity that had not been used before so casually or comprehensively in literature. This not only upset the critics; it upset the lawyers, too.

And of course it's easy to laugh at the critics, just as it's easy to laugh at the lawyers. Look at them handle this masterpiece! At the end of 1922, Sir Archibald Bodkin, the director for public prosecutions, wrote a legal opinion explaining why *Ulysses* was to be banned in Great Britain. He had only read the last chapter, and was "entirely unable to appreciate how those pages are relevant to the rest of the book, or, indeed, what the book itself is about." And yet, he concluded, there was "a great deal more than mere vulgarity or coarseness, there is a great deal of unmitigated filth and obscenity."

Yes, it's easy to laugh at the lawyers. But what if the lawyers were right? For the question that still needs to be answered, I think, is whether the arguments over the novel's obscenity and obscurity were just temporary historical effects or whether they point to the essence of Joyce's originality. Or at least, that is the question raised by Kevin Birmingham's *The Most Dangerous Book*. Birmingham is a lecturer in history and literature at Harvard, and he has written a detailed account of the gestation, publication, and legal battles of *Ulysses*—a compendium of raw materials that can also point toward why *Ulysses*, nearly one hundred years later, is still the *romanzaccione* of the future.

2.

A novel written in English around 1918 had a transatlantic legal problem. In the UK, there was the Obscene Publications Act, which defined as obscene

any publication whose tendency was "to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to immoral influences and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall." Such a wide definition created a potentially giant category, in pursuit of which were ranged the police, customs officers, and the postal service, aided by the London Society for the Suppression of Vice, and its successor, the Vigilance Association. In the US, there were three laws: the Comstock Act, named after the vice crusader Anthony Comstock, which banned the circulation of any "obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, print or other publication of an indecent character"—and was pursued with vigor by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), first by Comstock, then by his successor, John Sumner; the Tariff Act, which banned the importation of obscene material; and the Espionage Act, passed in June 1917, which criminalized "any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States." In other words, as Birmingham writes:

The Post Office was in a position to ban the circulation of several of the novel's chapters for being both obscene and anarchistic. In fact, the government's reaction to *Ulysses* reveals how much nineteenth-century ideas about obscenity shaped twentieth-century ideas about radicalism.

This is Birmingham's central insight. The anxiety about language was both sexual and political: it reflected a general fear of obscene, revolutionary subversives. Even if the most famous target of such fear was a radical movement of one: a hypereducated Irish novelist, living in Trieste, then Zurich, then Paris—who was pursued in the modernist epic Birmingham describes, with its vice crusaders, heroic editors, bookleggers, and dopey customs officers.

Before *Ulysses*, both Joyce's previous books had caused crises of publication, jeopardized by reneging printers and publishers frightened of prosecution. It was Ezra Pound, who discovered Joyce thanks to a tip from W.B. Yeats in 1913, who acted as his fixer. ("Demon pantechinon driver, busy with removal of old world into new quarters"—this was how Wyndham Lewis described Pound: a removal company for modernism.) Pound put Joyce in touch with Harriet Shaw Weaver and her magazine *The Egoist*; and when every printer in London refused to continue with Joyce's work it was Pound who turned to *The Little Review* for Joyce's new venture—*Ulysses*.

The Egoist, *The Little Review*...: the little magazines are another chapter in the epic chronicles of modernism. *The Little Review* was edited by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap out of their Greenwich Village apartment. (*Ulysses* was supported by a series of women: Shaw Weaver, Anderson and Heap, and finally Sylvia Beach.) In May 1917, Pound became the magazine's foreign editor. Soon, Joyce began sending Pound *Ulysses* for serialization.

The demon driver understood the legal problems. At first, he was defiant: "I suppose we'll be damn well suppressed if we print the text as it stands. BUT it is damn wellworth it."

On receiving the fourth episode, however, where Leopold Bloom calmly defecates, Pound made significant deletions—acting, like many other contemporary editors, as a pre-censor, before the text had been published.

Even Pound's carefulness, however, had limits. The first ban of *The Little Review* from the US mail came in January 1919, for a fleeting moment of nostalgic sexual reverie: "Wildly I lay on her, kissed her; eyes, her lips, her stretched neck, beating, woman's breasts full in her blouse of nun's veiling, fat nipples upright." The May 1919 issue was banned for smaller problems of student conversation—like one proposed title:

Everyman His Own Wife
or
A Honeymoon in the Hand
(a national immorality in three
orgasms)
by
Ballocky Mulligan

In January 1920, the problem was now political—a character's barroom description of Queen Victoria as "the flatulent old bitch that's dead."

And then, that autumn, the fourth and most substantial legal action against *Ulysses* began. The avant-garde reader discovered Bloom resting on the beach, toward sunset. He watches a girl, Gerty MacDowell, sitting in the distance. There are fireworks in the sky. Gerty leans back to watch, exposing her underwear. And Bloom, watching her closely, masturbates.

In his epic of world description, Joyce had gone too far.

The New York atmosphere in 1920 was high on surveillance and terror—the police's "Red Raids" and retaliatory anarchist bombings—when John Sumner, the head of the NYSSV, bought the September issue of *The Little Review* at the Washington Square Book Shop. Two weeks later, a warrant was issued for the arrest of the bookstore's owner on charges of selling obscene works. Those charges were soon transferred to Anderson and Heap, the magazine's editors. The trial eventually took place in February 1921. Representing *The Little Review* was John Quinn—a powerful lawyer who was also a modernist patron. His central defense was that since *Ulysses* was "cubism in literature" its obscenity could be excused by its obscurity: since who could be corrupted by something he or she didn't understand? The judges were unconvinced. Heap and Anderson were fined \$100, the issue was banned—and *Ulysses* became definitively unpublishable.

A possible solution, used by other banned books, both the purely literary and the purely pornographic, was a private edition, sold not on the open market but to a list of subscribers. This was the plan agreed on by Sylvia Beach. She had never published a book before, but she had met Joyce when he moved to Paris, and Shakespeare & Company was the local center of Anglophone modernism. Also, the trial had made *Ulysses* famous—and Beach wanted her own fame, too. Her publicity campaign proudly exploited the glamour of the banned:

ULYSSES suppressed four times during serial publication in "The

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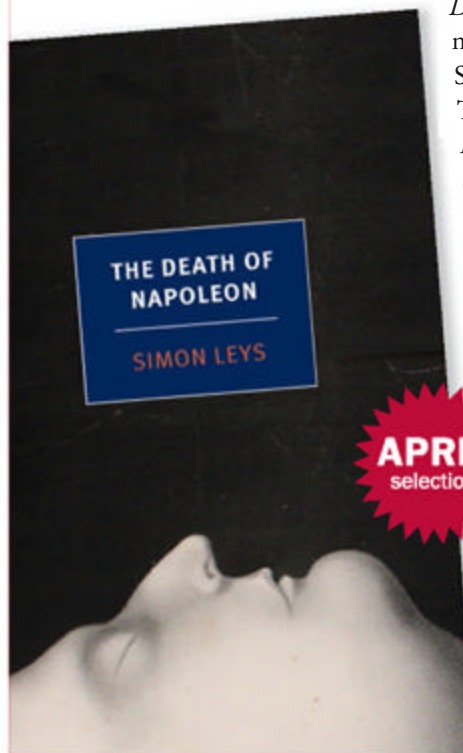
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Little Review" will be published by "SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY" complete as written.

Valery Larbaud's lecture at the bookshop in December 1921 was a further stage of prepublicity. Finally, on February 2, 1922, Joyce's fortieth birthday, *Ulysses* was published.

The sequel to this story, told with detailed sprightliness by Birmingham, is a long decade of bans, smuggling, struggles against piracy (and macabre intensifications of Joyce's eye problems, which have their own separate, gruesome interest). Sir Archibald Bodkin banned the book in Britain. Samuel Roth, a notorious rogue publisher in New York, put out pirated editions. And so it became inevitable that a final trial would take place—this time provoked not by the novel's attackers but by its defenders, desperate to end its ban and publish it legally. The case was masterminded by Bennett Cerf at Random House—he had signed a contract with Joyce, taking over from Sylvia Beach—and civil liberties attorney Morris Ernst.

In May 1932, an incriminating copy of *Ulysses* was planted on a boat coming into New York. Unfortunately, the customs officials were so overworked that they waved it through, for safe delivery to Random House—so Ernst had to take the parcel back and demand its immediate seizure under the Tariff Act. The book was passed to Sam Coleman, the chief assistant DA in the US attorney's office for the Southern District of New York. It was a masterpiece, Coleman concluded, but also definitively obscene. However, wary of the publicity, he wanted his superior, George Medalie, to make the final decision. Medalie decided to prosecute: he had no choice.

The case was heard on November 25, 1933, with Judge Woolsey presiding. Ernst's defense was that literature, by definition, could never be obscene. And Joyce's novel was pure literature—its single loyalty was to depicting the vast infinity of human consciousness: its giant associations and lapses of attention. It was a courageous argument, and a persuasive one. Joyce's subject, wrote Woolsey in his summing up, was "the screen of consciousness," onto which were projected not just impressions of the present moment, but also a whole frieze of memories and associations. It was some of the most accurate literary criticism *Ulysses* had so far received. Random House published its edition on January 25, 1934—almost twelve years after the first two copies had been delivered from the printer to Sylvia Beach, waiting at the Gare de Lyon in Paris.

3.

But what kind of object is it, really, this *super-novel*? An international bricolage—with its postage stamps and packing tape still visible. Just think of its giant range! There are obscene moments in this novel, absolutely, but then there are also soft domestic occurrences, like a cup of tea at breakfast ("The sluggish cream wound curdling spirals through her tea"), and shimmering intellectual conversations. "The supreme question about a work of art," a character comments, "is out of how deep a life does it spring. The painting of Gustave Moreau is the painting of ideas."

There is piety at a funeral or in a church, and also gossip, and drunk political argument. Most of all there is the largest range of the mind's activities that had so far been seen in a novel: reveries, meditations, miniature passing regrets and cadenzas of wishful thinking, like Bloom's endearing efforts to imagine the ideal advertisement. All of which are described with the infinite synthesizer of Joyce's talent, equally happy not just with obscenity but also with puns in Latin and French, and his panoply of pastiche styles.

To place too much emphasis on Joyce's legal battles with the censors, therefore, to range this hyperindividualist among his contemporary beatniks and free speech activists, seems too earnest, too retrospectively neat—as if all of Joyce's sprezzatura was motivated by an exhibitionistic exasperation at outmoded legalities. It reduces the million elements of a multifarious novel into a single constricting pattern. The reader, after all, who tries to plot a reading of *Ulysses* according to the sketch map of its officially obscene elements—a random swear word, a sexual reverie—will soon give up in mute despair.

And yet: this novel *is* a scandal. It is still a scandal, nearly a century after its first publication. For something is missing in *Ulysses*—which could be called romanticism, or the ideal, or the metaphysical; and its absence is the deep reason why Joyce's early readers were so alarmed, and why it can still disturb. Without it all the usual conventions are undermined. "What makes most people's lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism," Joyce once said to his friend Arthur Power, "some unrealizable or misconceived ideal. In fact you may say that idealism is the ruin of man, and if we lived down to fact, as primitive man had to do, we would be better off. . . . In *Ulysses* I tried to keep close to fact."

Ulysses: the least metaphysical novel ever written. . . .

In keeping close to fact, Joyce happened on a whole new way of writing novels. And the first, most intoxicating invention was the discovery of how comprehensive it was really possible to be. Even sexual fantasies, to choose an extreme example, could suddenly find their form. There's an episode that takes place in "nighttown," the red-light district of Dublin, which Joyce wrote as a dream play, where the real and unreal melt into each other. At one point, Bloom is momentarily transformed into a woman, while Bella Cohen, the brothel mistress, is momentarily transformed into Bello, a man. What follows is a domination fantasy, where Bello instructs Bloom in his new duties as a maid emptying the brothel's chamberpots ("lap it up like champagne. Drink me piping hot") until, bored, Bello tries to sell Bloom off:

What offers? (*He points.*) For that lot trained by owner to fetch and carry, basket in mouth. (*He bares his arm and plunges it elbowdeep in Bloom's vulva.*) There's fine depth for you! What, boys? That give you a hardon? (*He shoves his arm in a bidder's face.*) Here wet the deck and wipe it round!

If transgender fisting occurs earlier in the history of the novel, I would be surprised.

Yes, Joyce had happened on a new comprehensiveness, an absolute, equitable precision. If this was read as provocation, such provocation was only a side effect of a much grander project of universal description. ("I have come to the conclusion that I cannot write without offending people," he had already wearily noted, as early as 1906, when he was trying, and failing, to get *Dubliners* published.) In *Ulysses*, perhaps the most stunning achievement of this total writing was the character of Bloom himself. "You seem to have read a lot," Joyce once said to his friend, the painter Frank Budgen. "Do you know of any complete all-round character presented by any writer?" Budgen's answer was Homer's Ulysses, and it met with Joyce's approval. But Bloom is a much larger creation even



Sylvia Beach and James Joyce at Shakespeare & Company, Paris, circa 1920

than Ulysses, and he remains the most thoroughly imagined character in literature—an achievement perhaps only possible because of the multiple styles of Joyce's novel, which allowed him not just to describe Bloom's fantasies, including some that are obscene, but also his height and the precise layout of his ideal home.

And yet it's also true that, while the obscene in the novel is only one small aspect of this new largesse, it was perhaps through obscenity that he discovered the possibility of this revised gigantic scale—in private, in a series of letters he exchanged with his wife Nora in 1909, before he wrote *Ulysses*. These letters, often dismissed as a curiosity, are fluorescent with obscenity—with Joyce imagining Nora squatting over him, with "a big fat dirty snaking thing coming slowly out of your backside." Birmingham writes how these letters "are one of the secret headwaters of modern literature," and I think Birmingham is right. At this point, it seems that Joyce discovered that everything could be said. There was nothing that could not be transformed into language.

But of course, it was Joyce's originality with language itself that represented the extra problem for his contemporary readers: his subscribers and attorneys. And I think it's possible to argue that the linguistic loop-the-loops of Joyce's prose derive from the same disabused source: his meticulous materialism.

For something strange happens to language in *Ulysses*. In it, Joyce achieved verbal replicas of joyful brilliance—

not just the ordinary prose effects of precise verbs (cattle "slouching by on padded hoofs, whisking their tails slowly on their clotted bony croups"), but rhythmic reproductions ("A cavalcade in easy trot along Pembroke quay passed, outriders leaping, leaping in their, in their saddles"), and audio imitations ("Listen: a four-worded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rs-seeiss ooos.")

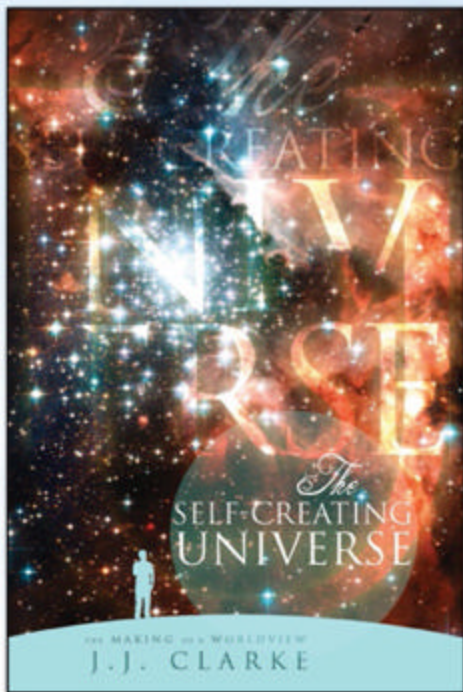
And while such replicas might at first sight seem to be ways of foregrounding the artifice of writing, I think the intention was really the reverse. "His writing is not *about* something," Samuel Beckett would famously write, "*it is that something itself.*" Joyce tried to make language become what it describes. He wanted to make it as literal as possible. "When the sense is sleep," added Beckett, "the words go to sleep. . . . When the sense is dancing, the words dance." Beckett was talking about *Finnegans Wake*, but the project is already visible in *Ulysses*. When the sense is trotting, the words trot; when the sense is water, the words deliquesce. For what could be more realistic, after all, than a sentence where the word becomes the thing it described?

What seems to have happened, as the novel progressed, was that Joyce realized that if he could transform any phenomenon into language, it was also true that the literalism could be flipped the other way. Language itself could be treated as a thing, a phenomenon to be included in his epic. Every day, we are assailed and contaminated by dead language, by language that has become an object like any other—the random clichés of our internal monologues, advertising slogans, the mass-produced styles of magazines and newspapers. And so, if the ideal was comprehensiveness, a total taxonomy of the world's phenomena, then he also needed to include not just the full range of the world's objects, but the full range of its styles, too. "To compress all these wanderings and clothe them in the form of this day is for me possible only by such variation which, I beg you to believe, is not capricious."

It's not capricious, but can poor Archibald Bodkin be blamed if the structure of the book eluded him? Instead of the usual unity of style, Joyce's novel would be held together by the repetition of its infinite motifs. *Ulysses* becomes its own self-generating machine, remixing its materials across its various techniques. In the episode on the beach, say, Bloom's orgasm had been covertly signaled by a romance description of the Mirus Bazaar firework display: "And O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads." And then, a hundred pages later, in the dream play of nighttown, those fireworks minutely return in a garishly self-referential stage direction: "*Mirus bazaar fireworks go up from all sides with symbolical phallospyrotechnic designs.*" With such variations and repeats, Joyce organized the vast expanse of his *romanzaccione*.

For Joyce was correct, in a way, to call this novel an encyclopedia. Its genre is not so much the novel as total collage, or world history. "I think I will write a history of the world," he's said to have told Harriet Shaw Weaver, on being asked what he planned to write after *Ulysses*. But then, he already had. □

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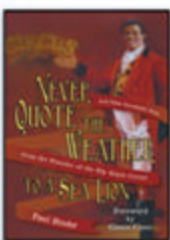
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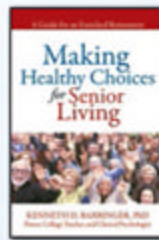
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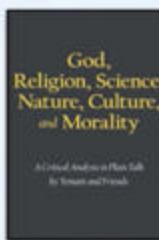
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The Floating Studio

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Manet Paints Monet:

A Summer in Argenteuil

by Willibald Sauerländer,
translated from the German
by David Dollenmayer.

Getty Research Institute, 79 pp., \$19.95

Online articles and blogs, and the streaming of lectures, have placed the last nails into the coffin of the small art book devoted to an illustrated talk by an eminent scholar, accessible to specialists and general readers alike. The Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures and the Council of the Frick Lecture Series are two such casualties (the former's demise in 2000 preceded the Internet Age). And so the Getty Research Institute is to be commended for commissioning David Dollenmayer's fine translation of Willibald Sauerländer's *Manet Malt Monet: Ein Sommer in Argenteuil*, a lecture given in Munich in the summer of 2004, published by Verlag C.H. Beck of that city in 2012, and now—over a decade later—appearing in a handsomely designed English edition.

Now aged ninety, Sauerländer—a contributor to *The New York Review* for over thirty years—is a medievalist recognized above all for his work on Gothic and Romanesque sculpture and architecture. His interests have ranged widely to embrace Poussin, Rubens, Houdon, and Fragonard, but only very recently has he chosen to write on nineteenth-century topics (as in reviews in 2012 of exhibitions devoted to Corot and Renoir). “Trained in looking at things in a very intense way,” he has noted that the art historian needs to “absorb the emotional process in front of a work of art” and then “undergo the critical task of asking ourselves whether the emotional impact of the art is identical with the historical, or original, mission of the object.”*

Two significant works by Édouard Manet, neither of which has traveled often to exhibitions—one in Stuttgart, *Claude and Camille Monet*; the other in Munich, *The Boat (Claude Monet in His Floating Studio)*—are the test cases for Sauerländer's empiricism. Each was painted in the summer of 1874, when Monet was living in Argenteuil, a suburb on the Seine some seven miles north of Paris, and Manet was spending time at his family's property in nearby Gennevilliers, just across the river. They show Monet and his wife seated in a small boat, the *bateau-atelier* from which the artist executed many of his views of the Seine at Argenteuil. They were done in the aftermath of the first Impressionist exhibition held in Paris between April 15 and May 15, 1874, in which Monet, Degas, Pissarro, and Renoir, among others, were prominent; but it was boycotted by Manet.

Sauerländer describes above all these two works: the relatively large painting in Stuttgart, measuring 41 3/4 by 54 3/4 inches, is an *ébauche*, never brought to completion; the

smaller work in Munich, 31 1/2 by 38 1/2 inches, is a finished canvas, signed on the hull of the boat in which Monet painted while floating on the streams that branched off from the Seine. In doing so, Sauerländer deftly introduces topics that have dominated scholarship on Impressionism over the past two decades. These include the development and reception of modernist painting in the aftermath of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the convulsions of the Paris Commune; the topography and culture of the suburbs as sites for the representation of modern life; industrialization,



Édouard Manet: The Boat (Claude Monet in His Floating Studio), 1874

leisure, and fashion; and the depiction of gender in avant-garde painting. For Sauerländer, Monet's influence in the summer of 1874 is crucial to what he considers to be Manet's “conversion” to Impressionism:

Summer vacations, the outdoors, gardens—these were not the customary sociotype of the dyed-in-the-wool Parisian Manet. Nevertheless, in those happy weeks he achieved a receptive if also distanced rapprochement between his own work and Monet's *plein air* painting.

As earlier historians of Manet have done, Sauerländer relates the paintings under consideration to the two other principal works on which the artist was engaged during this productive summer: *Argenteuil* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai) and *Boating* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), paintings similar in scale and ambition to *Claude and Camille Monet*, executed in the bright palette and the kind of handling of paint that was common among the Impressionists. What Sauerländer does not consider is that in embarking upon all three of these works in the summer of 1874, Manet—as was his custom—was already thinking ahead to the Salon of 1875 and to the sort of frontal, legible figure paintings that would have a strong presence in the vast and crowded rooms of the Pa-

lais de l'Industrie. Routinely identified as the “drill sergeant” of the Impressionists—despite his refusal to participate in any of their exhibitions—it is clear that Manet now intended to come out (as it were) and show solidarity with the fledgling avant-garde, including such painters as Monet and Renoir.

Despite having the appearance of being painted quickly, Manet's canvases were notoriously slow and deliberate in their gestation. The artist required the human presence of his subjects at all times; his friend Stéphane Mallarmé alluded to “the fatigues of the twentieth sitting.” Madame Morisot in-

of Pictures by Modern French Artists” at C. Deschamps Galleries at 168 New Bond Street. Entitled *Les Canotiers*, it was dismissed by *The Art Journal* as “a couple of very ordinary-looking lovers sitting on the gunwale of a boat, with a piece of the most intensely-blue water we ever saw.” Critical of the painting's “vulgar figures, ... coarse brushwork, and ... outrageously-crude colour,” the reviewer characterized Manet as “the expounder of the new faith,” noting that “the banner under which he and his fellow disciples propose marching to glory has inscribed on it the legend ‘Impressionists.’”

There can be no doubt of Manet's artistic and affective complicity with Monet at Argenteuil in the summer of 1874. On July 23, Manet had been invited to paint *en plein air* in the garden of Monet's rented villa on the rue Pierre Guienne (a house that Manet had found for him three years earlier). In a vibrating, high-keyed canvas, today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he portrayed Camille Monet and their seven-year-old son Jean seated on the lawn, with Monet in his painter's smock tending to the flowers behind them. As Sauerländer observes in one of his most endearing insights, a cock, hen, and chick line up in the left foreground, affectionately paraphrasing the family as in an animal fable. While Manet was at work, Renoir arrived, borrowed paints, brushes, and a canvas from Monet, and executed a vivid close-up of Camille and Jean, joined by the rooster. Irritated by Renoir's intrusion, Manet is reported to have told Monet, “He has no talent, that boy. Since he's your friend, you should tell him to give up painting!”

Cordiality is also in evidence in Manet's smaller, finished painting, now in Munich, of Monet and Camille in his floating studio, one of ten works selected for the artist's mid-career exhibition at La Vie Moderne, Charpentier's gallery, in April 1880. Antonin Proust recalled how fond Manet was of this canvas—“*toile qu'il affectionnait particulièrement et qu'il intitulait Monet dans son atelier*.” The title, like the painting, testifies to the general effacement of Camille.

Monet and Manet's acquaintance of eight years had not always been amiable; the tensions and jealousies between them—as well as their fundamentally divergent approach to the Salon—are somewhat occluded in Sauerländer's retelling of the friendly summer encounter in Argenteuil. In an interview given in November 1900, Monet, aged sixty, noted that he had “never forgotten the contempt that [Manet] showed for my beginnings,” adding that Manet had it in for him at the time (“*Manet avait contre moi une vieille dent*”). Monet had first crossed Manet's path at the Salon of 1865, where confusion resulted owing to the regulation of hanging works alphabetically by artists' names. There, Monet's two large seascapes had been placed near the older artist's highly controversial nude *Olympia* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and *Christ Mocked by the Soldiers* (Art Institute of Chicago), and the Monets

*“In Conversation: Willibald Sauerländer with Sasha Suda,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 3, 2010. Additional footnotes appear in the Web version of this article at www.nybooks.com.

were much admired. Infuriated at being congratulated for Monet's seascapes, Manet apparently exclaimed, "Who is this rascal who pastiches my painting so basely?"

The following year, Monet's *Camille* (Kunsthalle Bremen) was well received at the Salon of 1866—Monet's two entries had been rejected—with critics and caricaturists reveling in the similarity of the two artists' surnames. "Monet or Manet! Monet! But we owe this Monet to Manet. Bravo Monet. Thank you Manet!" The realist critic and novelist Edmond Duranty wrote to the artist Alphonse Legros in October 1866 that Manet "is much troubled over his rival Monet. So much so, people are saying that, having 'manetized' him, he would now like to 'demonetize' him."

Monet was dismissive of Manet's *Woman with a Parrot* (1866, Metropolitan Museum of Art)—Zola considered it the best of his recent paintings—writing to Frédéric Bazille in June 1867 that "*La Femme rose* is bad, his earlier work is better than what he is doing at the moment." He was also critical of Manet's hunger for approval at this time—"God, how annoying it is that he courts compliments as he does"—and thoroughly insensitive to the financial and professional pressures the artist faced in mounting his one-man exhibition at the Pont d'Alma in the summer of 1867. In this period Monet was friendlier with Gustave Courbet, who was a witness at his marriage to Camille in June 1870. Although Monet was a part of Manet's circle at the Café Guerbois in the late 1860s, in a letter to Bazille from Étretat in December 1868, he claimed not to be missing their reunions in the slightest.

Against this background, we arrive at a clearer understanding of Monet's marginal, indeed precarious position in Fantin-Latour's *Atelier in the Batignolles* (1870, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), where he appears at the far right, hidden behind the tall and elegant Bazille, and seems to be struggling to keep his foothold in the canvas. By contrast it is Renoir who, with Manet's encouragement, is portrayed at the center of the composition in a pose of solemn veneration, his profile heightened by the halo of the empty gilded frame.

In his figure paintings, landscapes, and still lifes of the 1860s, Manet had created a new pictorial language that would sustain, consciously or not, the younger generation of Impressionists in the 1870s. Most radical were the technical innovations of Manet's *peinture claire*—the abandoning of traditional chiaroscuro, the suppression of half-tones (only good, he said, "for the *Magasin pittoresque* engravers"), a greatly heightened chromatic register, and the equal value given to all aspects of the composition. (This was described by one anxious critic as a consequence of Manet's "pantheism.") Despite his willingness to exhibit in dealers' galler-

ies, at home and abroad, and in provincial exhibitions, Manet's primary arena of engagement was always the Paris Salon, whose calendar and protocols determined his working process until the end of his life.

Although Manet claimed in 1867 to have "painted sincere works" and to have been "concerned only to convey his impressions," throughout the 1860s he could never entirely liberate himself from "the richness of the museums... and the memory of paintings done by the old masters." Pace Baudelaire and Zola, Manet's exhibition pictures of the 1860s remained indebted to a pantheon of artists of the past: Titian, Velázquez,



Édouard Manet: Argenteuil, 1874

Zurbarán, Vermeer, Hals, Goya. Manet might assert that "he has simply tried to be himself and no one else," but until the 1870s—and notwithstanding the originality of his style—the reverse would seem the more accurate assessment.

Manet was dismissive of Monet's claims to have originated painting in nature: "Just look at this young man who wants to do plein-air painting. As if the old masters had never considered such a thing." Nor did he need Monet's example to free him. Manet's earliest plein-air paintings, *In the Garden* of 1870 (Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont) and *The Railway* of 1872–1873 (National Gallery of Art, Washington), predate the summer in Argenteuil. If the suburban encounter chez Monet was not quite the road to Damascus that Sauerländer imagines, it is the case that Manet's exposure to Monet at work and his growing sympathy and engagement with the group around him led to even greater freedom in his brushwork and a heightening of his palette. Yet there were always limits to Manet's *pleinairisme*. He was unable fully to embrace the Impressionists' reliance on coloristic modeling to replicate the effects of daylight, and was never at ease with the softer, more fragmented brushwork that Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro pioneered during the mid- to late 1870s.

Paradoxically, Manet's most fully realized Impressionist landscapes—done far from Argenteuil and Monet—are the two dazzling views of Venice's Grand Canal, painted in Tissot's company in the autumn of 1875. To a compatriot he meets at Florian's, Manet confides: "It's the most difficult thing, to give the impression that a hat is sitting properly on the model's head, or that a boat has been constructed from planks cut and fitted according to the rules of geometry." (This is a comment also applicable to the paintings discussed in Sauerländer's essay.) The artist dominates his motif as an act of mind: "I must... define my picture, as if I could already see it framed." It is the fundamental structure and harmony of the composition, no less than the instantaneity of the scene, that preoccupies him:

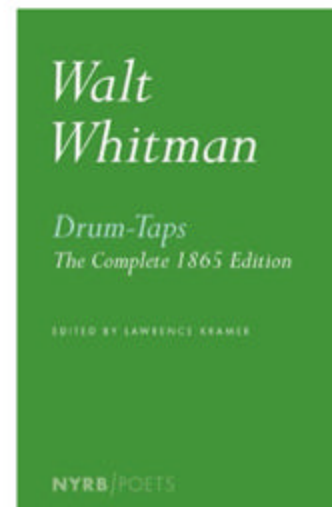
The lagoon mirrors the sky, and at the same time acts as a great stage for the boats and their passengers, the masts, the banners, etc. It has its own particular colour, the nuances it borrows from the sky, the clouds, from crowds, from objects reflected in the water. There can be no sharp definition, no linear structure in something that is all movement; only tonal values which, if correctly observed, will constitute its true volume, its essential, underlying design.

In seeking to capture sensation and the experience of being present through the *tâche colorante*, Manet allies himself with the most forward-thinking practitioners of the New Painting in the 1870s. But he is equally attentive to the poetry of place, as described by Henry James in *The Aspern Papers*: "How the sense of floating between marble palaces and reflected lights disposed the mind to freedom and ease."

The depiction of water provides a leitmotif in Sauerländer's book, one that draws attention to the "colorful reflections of light on water [that] were the inexhaustible main theme of Monet's painting." Manet's designation of Monet as *le Raphaël de l'eau* is quoted several times. But as remembered by Antonin Proust, Manet's comment implies a more profound appreciation of the principles of Impressionism. Manet praised Monet for knowing how to paint water in "all its movements, whether deep or shallow, at every time of day." And he concluded:

I emphasize that last phrase, because of Courbet's magnificent remark to Daubigny who had complimented him on a seascape: "It's not a seascape, it's a time of day." That's what people don't fully understand yet, that one doesn't paint a landscape, a seascape, a figure; one paints the effect of a time of day on a landscape, a seascape, or a figure.

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In teaching Chinese-language courses to American students, which I have done about thirty times, perhaps the most anguishing question I get is “Professor Link, what is the Chinese word for _____?” I am always tempted to say the question makes no sense. Anyone who knows two languages moderately well knows that it is rare for words to match up perfectly, and for languages as far apart as Chinese and English, in which even grammatical categories are conceived differently, strict equivalence is not possible. *Book* is not *shu*, because *shu*, like all Chinese nouns, is conceived as an abstraction, more like “bookness,” and to say “a book” you have to say, “one volume of bookness.” Moreover *shu*, but not *book*, can mean “writing,” “letter,” or “calligraphy.” On the other hand you can “book a room” in English; you can’t *shu* one in Chinese.

I tell my students that there are only two kinds of words they can safely regard as equivalents: words for numbers (excepting integers under five, the words for which have too many other uses) and words that are invented expressly for the purpose of serving as equivalents, like *xindiantu* (heart-electric-chart) for “electrocardiogram.” I tell them their goal in Chinese class should be to set aside English and get started with thinking in Chinese.

This raises the question of what translation is. I’m afraid it is something quite different from what the person on the street takes it to be. It is not code-switching. Let’s take a tiny example, chosen at random, from David Roy’s translation of the immense sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Chin P’ing Mei*, or *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, written during the Ming dynasty, the final volume of which has recently appeared. Here the doughty female protagonist, Golden Lotus, is waiting in a garden for her latest lover, who is also her son-in-law. To tease her, the son-in-law hides under a raspberry trellis, then jumps out as she passes by and throws his arms around her:

“Phooey!” the woman exclaimed.
“You little short-life! You gave me quite a start by jumping out that way.”

Two other English translations of *Chin P’ing Mei*, both published in London in 1939, put this line differently. Clement Egerton (assisted by the distinguished modern Chinese novelist Lao She) writes:

“Oh,” she cried, “you young villain, what do you mean by rushing out and frightening me like that?”¹

¹*The Golden Lotus: A Translation, from the Chinese Original, of the Novel Chin P’ing Mei* (London: Routledge, 1939), Vol. 4, p. 129.



“Pan Jinlian (Golden Lotus) Humiliated for Being Intimate with a Servant”; from Illustrations for the Novel Jin Ping Mei, or The Plum in the Golden Vase, seventeenth century

Bernard Miall, retranslating an earlier abridged German rendition by Franz Kuhn, has this:

“You rascal, to startle me so!” she cried, scolding him and laughingly releasing herself.²

A translation into French in 1985 by André Lévy reads:

*Lotus-d’Or s’exclama: “Oh, le mauvais garnement! Qu’est-ce que c’est que ces façons de jaillir et vous causer pareille frayeur!”*³

None of these translations can be called wrong, or even “more right” than any other. In each case the translator has grasped the original well, but then, in turning to the needs of second-language readers, handles dilemmas differently.

Is the mischievous lover a short-life, villain, rascal, or *garnement*? “Short-life” is a literal reflection of the Chinese *duanming*; “rascal” and “*garnement*” are attempts to find less literal cultural equivalents. How literal should one be? Egerton’s “villain” trusts the reader to supply irony—fair enough, in this case, but how far should such trusting go?

²*Chin P’ing Mei: The Adventurous History of Hsi Men and His Six Wives* (London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1939), p. 638.

³*Fleur en Fiole d’Or*, translated, edited, and annotated by André Lévy (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), Vol. 2, p. 891.

Miall’s “laughingly releasing herself” is not stated in the original, but is certainly implied. Should the translator help out like this, if there is a danger that a reader from another culture might miss something? Lévy’s “*Qu’est-ce que c’est que . . .*” captures the lady’s surprise with precision, but it contributes to a sentence that is twice as long as the corresponding Chinese sentence and lacks its balanced rhythm of five-plus-five syllables. Where should the balance lie between matching form and matching sense?

In the end, none of the renditions feels exactly like the original. In that sense they all fail. But failure by that standard is inevitable, because my language students are incorrect to think that exact equivalence is possible. A translator chooses what to sacrifice in favor of what, and the choices are not “correct” or “incorrect,” but value judgments.

The most fundamental dilemma is between how much to pull the reader into the original language, preserving its literal meanings and supplying footnotes to spell out complicated things, and how much to step back, be more “free,” and try, as Kuhn and Miall are most successful at doing, to offer the reader what might be called “comparable experience.” Puns are an extreme and therefore clear example of the problem. Translators from Chinese usually ignore puns. Sometimes they dissect them in footnotes, and scholars appreciate the dissection because

scholars are interested in innards. But a scalpel kills a pun, of course; a dead pun is no longer funny, and right there one aspect of “comparable experience” is lost. What is the alternative, though? To try to invent a parallel pun in the second language? Such efforts demand great ingenuity as well as a willingness to take considerable liberty with denotative meaning.

David Roy is aware of these dilemmas. He sometimes tries to give the modern American reader comparable experience—for example, in the above, “phooey!” for the Chinese *pei!*, which has a derisive flavor and might even have been “jerk!” or “get lost!”—in any case something a bit more colorful than the “oh” that Egerton and Lévy settle for. But on balance Roy comes down much more on the side of reflecting and explaining the word level in the original. He is the scholars’ scholar. He writes more than 4,400 endnotes and advises in his introduction that they are necessary if the novel is to be “properly understood.” Jonathan Spence, in a review in these pages of volume one of Roy’s translation, wrote that the meticulous notes make “even a veteran reader of monographs smile with a kind of quiet disbelief.”⁴

Spence’s fine essay, which I recommend be read together with this one, appeared two decades ago, at a time when Roy reported that he had already been working on his project for a quarter-century. Today the eighty-year-old Roy can point to a life’s work of enviable concreteness: 3,493 pages, five volumes, and 13.5 pounds, the world’s only translation of “everything,” as he puts it, in a huge and heterogeneous novel that has crucial importance in Chinese literary tradition. Roy was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease just as he was finishing volume five.

Chin P’ing Mei is about the rise and fall of a corrupt merchant named Hsi-men Ch’ing and others in his wealthy household, including his six wives, of whom Golden Lotus is one. Most of the characters accept that deception, bribery, blackmail, profligacy, flamboyant sex, and even murder are normal in life, although it is clear from the narrator’s pervasive irony that the author disapproves of each. A Buddhist frame for the story warns of consequences for karma—the effect on a person’s destiny of bad and good deeds. Readers are invited also to see a political allegory on corruption at the imperial court. The story is set during the reign of Emperor Huizong of Song (1101–1126 CE), but the allegory points clearly to contemporary Ming rulers as well.

The story sprawls. There are more than eight hundred named characters, from high officials and military commanders to peddlers and prostitutes, with actors, tailors, monks and nuns, fortunetellers, acrobats, and many others, even cats and dogs, in between. Roy helps us keep track of everyone in a fifty-six-page “cast of characters.” The narration is varied, too. In Spence’s words, it includes “pretty much every imaginable mood and genre—from sadism to tenderness, from light

⁴“Remembrance of Ming’s Past,” *The New York Review*, June 23, 1994.

humor to philosophical musings, from acute social commentary to outrageous satire.⁵ It is also full of puns and word games.⁵

The author is unknown, and the question of who it might have been has generated extraordinary controversy, which remains unresolved. We do know it was a superbly erudite person because of the many insertions into the text of songs and set phrases drawn from the histories, drama, storytelling, and fiction available at that time. In the original woodblock printing of the text, characters follow one another, without punctuation, no matter their source. Modern printings provide punctuation, but Roy goes further by devising a system of indentation and differing type sizes to set off allusions, poems, and songs. With this editorial help, the translation is actually easier to read than the original.

During the four hundred years since it appeared, *Chin P'ing Mei* has been known in China as an "obscene book." Governments have banned it and parents have hidden it from children. One widespread anecdote—a false story, but a true indication of the book's reputation—is that it originated as a murder weapon: the author applied poison to the corners of the pages and presented it to an enemy, knowing that his foe would need to wet his fingertips with saliva in order to keep turning the pages fast enough. The plan would not have worked, though, because the pornography is by no means so densely packed. Zhang Zhupo, the first significant critic of the novel, wrote in the late seventeenth century that "anyone who says that *Chin P'ing Mei* is an obscene book has probably only taken the trouble to read the obscene passages."

Westerners, too, have sometimes become fixated on the pornography, and translators have handled it in different ways. In one passage Golden Lotus, after exhausting Hsi-men Ch'ing's male member during a ferocious sexual encounter, reapplies her silky fingers but cannot get it to stand up. Hsi-men, in character, says, in Roy's translation, "It's all your fault." Lévy puts this as "*C'est par ton initiative.*" Egerton says, "*Tua culpa est.*" (Egerton puts all of the more pornographic passages into Latin, whether from prudery or to encourage British schoolboys in their studies, he does not say.) Kuhn and Miall omit the passage.

Serious scholars agree that it makes no sense to reject the wide-ranging novel as pornography but do not agree about how well crafted it is. It contains odd turns of direction, abrupt shifts of mood, digressions that seem to lead nowhere, and discrepancies that result at least in part from the borrowing of much material from other sources. The controversial question is whether these are flaws or a different kind of careful writing. Is the novel a haphazard pile, casually assembled and often tedious to read?⁶ Or, as Roy holds, as does

Andrew Plaks in a remarkably learned commentary,⁷ is it a "finely wrought structure" in which "every thread is carefully plotted in advance," and which bears not only reading but careful rereading?

Plaks shows that apparently whimsical insertions actually can have significant parts in foreshadowing events or offering ironic comment. A knowledgeable Ming reader will know, he writes, that a song's reference to a faithless brother prefigures the way in which Hsi-men Ch'ing's close friends will rob his widow blind right after his funeral. The huge novel also has an architecture that he and Roy explain. It consists of a hundred chapters, organized in ten groups of ten, called "decades." Each decade introduces a theme, then has a "twist," as Roy calls it, around the seventh chapter of the decade, and a culmination in the ninth. The first five decades of the novel show the rise of Hsi-men Ch'ing and the last five his decline. The first two put the main characters on stage, the middle six say what they do there, and the last two take them off. Plaks notes many finer-grained mirrorings as well. It is in chapter 18, for example, that Golden Lotus and her son-in-law lover (mentioned above) first meet, and in chapter 82, eighteen from the end, that they make love.

It is hard to be sure that the author intended all of the finer patterns that these and other critics have identified. When an ocean of material is provided, there is plenty of room for readers to assemble their own patterns. Still, the evidence for Roy's claim that *Chin P'ing Mei* is "the work of a single creative imagination" is very strong, not only because of structural features but because of the consistent moral point of view of the implied author.

Irony pervades the narration. It comes in part from the device of the "simulated storyteller," a voice that supplies the chapters with wry labels ("P'ing-an Absconds with Jewelry from the Pawnshop; Auntie Hsüeh Cleverly Proposes a Personal Appeal") and opens each with the phrase "The story goes that..." The cumulative effect is something like "let's watch, dear reader, as these clowns perform their next act." There is entertainment in the watching, to be sure, but Roy and Plaks are clearly right to point to an underlying moral seriousness as well.

The author is bemoaning a wholesale departure from the principles of Confucianism. The pleasures that the human beings in *Chin P'ing Mei* enjoy are primarily sensual—food, drink, and sex; social pleasures are superficial, driven by ostentation and hypocrisy. Power inherent in social position gets people what they want, and they don't worry about any line between its proper and improper use; cleverness is important for its utility in manipulating one's way to a goal. Whether it is reached by wit or by might, a victory speaks for itself. Wealth and status—up to and including the imperial court—are no cure for the moral rot the author evokes; they only make it worse.

It is useful to reconsider the sex from this point of view. The author of *Chin*

⁷Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 132.

⁵See a full exposition in Katherine Carlitz, *The Rhetoric of Chin P'ing Mei* (Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁶The eminent critic C. T. Hsia, who died on December 29, 2013, wrote about *Chin P'ing Mei*'s "obvious structural anarchy" in *The Classic Chinese Novel* (Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 180.

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P'ing Mei condemns promiscuity not because it is an affront to the divine, as it would be in much of the Abrahamic tradition, but because it is a form of abandon or excess, more like gluttony. When the rich and powerful are greedy, picking up concubines the way wealthy Americans pick up vacation homes, they need criticism. Hsi-men Ch'ing says that his "Heaven-splashing wealth and distinction" qualify him even to rape goddesses if he likes. A good person, especially an official who has responsibilities in governance, should be spending his energies in better ways.

Yet the assumption that wealth and power do entitle men to multiple sex partners has lasted throughout Chinese history. The earliest records show kings having several consorts; in late imperial times the keeping of concubines in wealthy households was common; and even today the pattern of successful businessmen keeping "second women"—or third, or fourth—is widespread. Modern taboos now prevent the ladies from living under the same roof, but the assumption that keeping several women is a perk of wealth and power is not much different from earlier times.

If this seems discouraging, it should also be said for China that criticism of the practice, or at least of its excesses, has an equally long tradition. The earliest examples we have of pornography in China are descriptions of behavior in imperial harems. And on today's Internet, where satire of the powerful is vigorous, sexual misbehavior is second only to illicit wealth as the favorite indictment. So *Chin P'ing Mei* is in good company. I'm not sure David Roy should feel happy or sad that the novel had something of a resurgence on the Internet in 2013, the year his volume five was published. In February Lian Qingchuan, a prominent journalist, wrote an article called "We Live Today in the World of *Chin P'ing Mei*." A flurry of enthusiastic reader comments said things like "I'm glad somebody told me this book was written five hundred years ago! I never would have known!" Others commented that Hsi-men Ch'ing was a mere beginner in sexual aggression compared to his avatars today.

In using the novel as a mirror for society, these Internet commentators recall another way that scholars have studied *Chin P'ing Mei*. Because the novel was the first in China to describe daily life, as opposed to legends or ideals, social historians have mined it for data. If you study commerce, for example, the sizes of bribes, alms, and gifts are there, as well as prices for rolls of silk, peeled chestnuts, goose gizzards, new beds, old buildings, and much more, as well as the costs of the services of storytellers, go-betweens, carpenters, singing girls, and others. In the 1970s, F.W. Mote, the eminent Ming historian at Princeton, although he judged *Chin P'ing Mei* "not a success" as a novel, taught a graduate seminar using it as a source for history. One problem with the approach was the distorting effect of the author's satire. For example, Hsi-men Ch'ing bribes Grand Preceptor Cai Jing, arbiter of the dynasty, often and lavishly—once with a birthday present of two hundred taels of gold, eight gold goblets, twenty pairs of cups made of jade and rhinoceros horn, and more. But when Hsi-men dies and a protégé

of the Grand Preceptor comes to offer respects, he brings only paltry gifts, including woolen socks and four dried fish. This is not realism, as C.T. Hsia points out, but satire to make a point.⁸ Mote, to avoid this kind of problem in his seminar, devised a "principle of inadvertency." Whenever a detail mattered to the story line, or to the author's evaluation of something, the students were to set it aside. But the thousands of details offered inadvertently were fair game.

Whether *Chin P'ing Mei* is taken as broad social canvas, literary innova-



'Ch'en Ching-chi [Golden Lotus's son-in-law] Enjoys One Beauty and Makes Out with Two'; from *The Plum in the Golden Vase*

tion, serious ethical criticism, or only spicy entertainment, a question that has haunted its study over the last hundred years is whether it is—indeed whether China has—a "great novel." I think China would be better off if the question were not asked so much.

In the early twentieth century, when memories of humiliating defeats by foreign powers had stimulated Chinese thinkers to go in search of the secrets of wealth and power, Liang Qichao, a leading reformer, wrote a powerful essay in which he argued that one reason Western countries are strong is that the thinking of their people is unified and vigorous, and a main reason their thinking has been vigorous is that they read vigorous fiction. So, he concluded, China needs good novels. Beginning in the late 1910s, Hu Shi, Lu Xun, and other May Fourth thinkers began looking back at China's past to see if some good novels might already have been written. A canon was born, listed often as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, *Chin P'ing Mei*, *The Scholars*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*,⁹ and these writings were compared to major works of European fiction. In the latter twentieth century sympathetic Western Sinologists have supported China's quest to rediscover its great novels.

There has been progress in that direction. For *Chin P'ing Mei*, Roy and

Plaks, and before them Patrick Hanan, have established the novel's importance as an innovation. Its unity of conception and elaborate design epitomize "the Ming novel" and set an example for later long fiction in China, most importantly *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This kind of argument for *Chin P'ing Mei* resembles the way James Wood argues for Flaubert when he writes that "there really is a time before Flaubert and a time after him," and "novelists should thank Flaubert the way poets thank spring."¹⁰ The particular strengths that Wood finds in Flaubert are very different from those that Roy and Plaks find in *Chin P'ing Mei*, but the argument about a historical watershed is similar—until, anyway, Roy and Plaks start acknowledging flaws in *Chin P'ing Mei*. Wood credits Flaubert with immaculate planning and selection of detail, done as if by an invisible hand; Roy and Plaks see something like that in *Chin P'ing Mei*, but also find "loose ends," "glaring internal discrepancies," and other infelicities.¹¹ When Roy defends *Chin P'ing Mei* by calling it a "work in progress," he recalls for me G. K. Chesterton's insight that "if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." The first airplane didn't soar, either, but it's very good that someone got a prototype off the ground.

But why do I feel that China—and Sinologists—would be better off to relax about the idea that "we have great novels, too"? I feel this because I think that setting up literary civilizations as rivals (although I can understand the insecurities that led Liang Qichao and others to do it) only gets in the way of readers enjoying imaginative works. What does it matter if the author of *Chin P'ing Mei* might be less than Flaubert? Why should anyone have to feel defensive?

Let me put it the other way around. Novels were not the primary language art in imperial China. Measured by volume, *xi*, translatable as "drama" or "opera," would be in first place, and measured by beauty, calligraphy or poetry would be. Should we compare poetry across civilizations? If we do, classical Chinese poetry wins easily. The contest is almost unfair, because, as my students of Chinese language eventually come to see, the fundamentals of language are different.

Indo-European languages, with their requirements that tense, number, gender, and part of speech be specified, and with the mandatory word inflections that the specifications entail, and with the extra syllables that the inflections add, just can't achieve the same purity—a sense of terseness and expanse at the same time—that tenseless, numberless, voiceless, uninflected, and uninflectible Chinese characters can achieve. In a contest, one person has a butterfly net and the other a window screen. Emily Dickinson might have come to be known as the greatest poet in world history if she had written in classical Chinese. Should Westerners feel defensive that this was not the case? Far better just to inherit what we all have done, and leave it there. □

⁸Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, pp. 175–176.

⁹I use C.T. Hsia's choice of translation for the titles here, but there are several others.

¹⁰James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 39.

¹¹Roy, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* Vol. 1, p. xx; cf. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks*, p. 70.

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Ill: Kiss, 1968, gouache on rag board, 25 x 25 inches.

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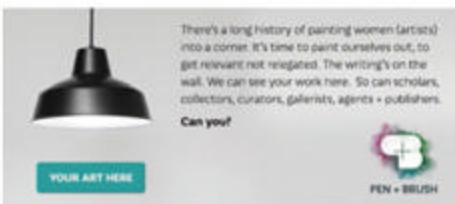
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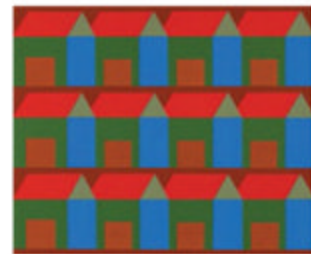
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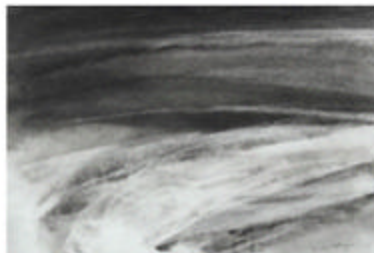


BASCOVE, Bronx Whitestone Bridge, 1998, oil on canvas, 30" x 48"

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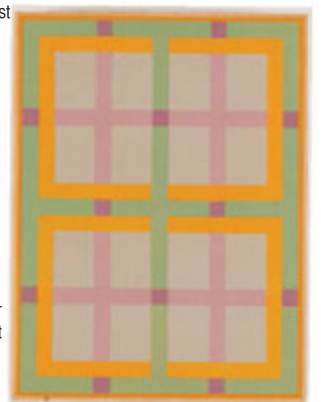
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VINCENT LONGO Lattice Window, 2005 acrylic on wood 12 x 9 inches photography by Jenny Gorman



Ill: Kiss, 1968, gouache on rag board, 25 x 25 inches.

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The Master Writer of the City

Janet Malcolm

Man in Profile:

Joseph Mitchell of *The New Yorker*

by Thomas Kunkel.

Random House, 384 pp., \$30.00

In 1942 *The New Yorker* published Joseph Mitchell's profile of a homeless man in Greenwich Village named Joe Gould, whose claim to notice—the thing that separated him from other sad misfits—was “a formless, rather mysterious book” he was known to be writing called “An Oral History of Our Time,” begun twenty-six years earlier and already, at nine million words, “eleven times as long as the Bible.” Twenty-two years later, in 1964, the magazine published another piece by Mitchell called “Joe Gould's Secret” that ran in two parts, and that drew a rather less sympathetic and a good deal more interesting portrait of Gould.

Mitchell revealed what he had kept back in the profile—that Gould was a tiresome bore and cadger who attached himself to Mitchell like a leech, and finally forced upon him the realization that the “Oral History” did not exist. After confronting Gould with this knowledge, the famously kindhearted Mitchell regretted having done so:

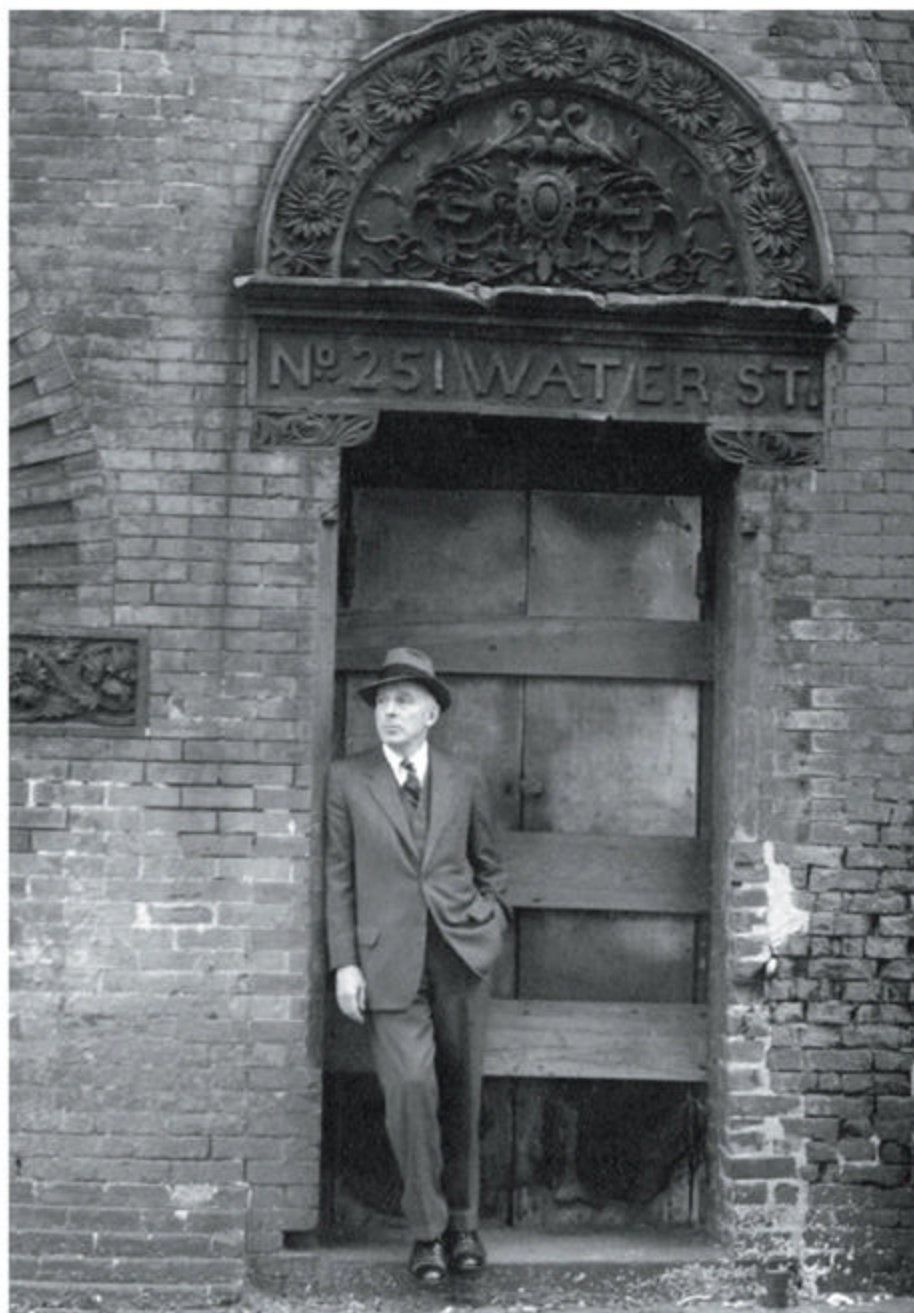
I have always deeply disliked seeing anyone shown up or found out or caught in a lie or caught red-handed doing anything, and now, with time to think things over, I began to feel ashamed of myself for the way I had lost my temper and pounced on Gould.

Mitchell went on to make a generous imaginative leap. “He very likely went around believing in some hazy, self-deceiving, self-protecting way that the Oral History did exist.... It might not exactly be down on paper, but he had it all in his head, and any day now he was going to start getting it down.”

“It was easy for me to see how this could be,” Mitchell continued in a remarkable turn, “for it reminded me of a novel that I had once intended to write.” The novel, conceived “under the spell of Joyce's *Ulysses*,... was to be ‘about’ New York City” and to chronicle a day and a night in the life of a young reporter from the South who was no longer a believing Baptist but is “still inclined to see things in religious terms” and whose early exposure to fundamentalist evangelists has

left him with a lasting liking for the cryptic and the ambiguous and the incantatory and the disconnected and the extravagant and the oracular and the apocalyptic.... I had thought about this novel for over a year. Whenever I had nothing else to do, I would automatically start writing it in my mind.... But the truth is, I never actually wrote a word of it.

In fact, however, Mitchell did write—if not a novel exactly—a book about New York City that fully achieved his young self's large literary ambition. The book is *The Bottom of the Harbor*, published in 1959, a collection of six pieces that



Joseph Mitchell in Lower Manhattan, near the old Fulton Fish Market; photograph by his wife, Therese Mitchell

are nothing if not cryptic and ambiguous and incantatory and disconnected and extravagant and oracular and apocalyptic. The book was reprinted in the thick anthology of Mitchell's writings, *Up in the Old Hotel*, published in 1992, but it deserves to stand alone. The other books reprinted in the anthology—*McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, *Old Mr. Flood*, and *Joe Gould's Secret*—are wonderful, but they are to *The Bottom of the Harbor* what *Tom Sawyer* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* are to *Huckleberry Finn*.

The opening piece, “Up in the Old Hotel” (from which the later anthology took its name), tells a minimal, almost nonexistent story. Mitchell goes for breakfast to Sloppy Louie's, a seafood restaurant in a decrepit old building on South Street in the Fulton Fish Market, and converses with its owner, Louis Morino, “a contemplative and generous and worldly-wise man in his middle sixties,” a widower and father of two daughters, who emigrated to New York from a fishing village in Italy in 1905 at the age of seventeen, and worked as a waiter in restaurants in Manhattan and Brooklyn until 1930 when he bought his own restaurant.

Almost imperceptibly, Mitchell turns over the narration of the story to Louie,

as he calls Morino, sliding into the long monologue that was once a commonplace of *New Yorker* nonfiction, and is a signature of Mitchell's mature work. Occasionally Mitchell breaks in to speak in his own voice, which is slightly different from Louie's, but in the same register, giving the effect of arias sung by alternating soloists in an oratorio.

Louie dilates on a change that has taken place in the clientele of his restaurant, which used to consist solely of fishmongers and fish buyers. Now, people from the financial district, the insurance district, and the coffee-roasting district are coming in at lunchtime, and on some days the lunch crowd is so great that latecomers have to wait for tables. “This gets on his nerves,” Mitchell says of the too-successful restaurateur, who has reluctantly decided to put tables on the second floor to accommodate the overflow. His reluctance comes from the fact that his building, like the other South Street buildings that stand on filled-in river swamp, has no cellar, and he has to use the second floor to store supplies and equipment and as a changing room for his waiters. “I don't know what I'll do without it, only I got to make room somehow,” Louie says. “That ought to be easy,” Mitchell says. “You've got four empty floors up above.”

But it isn't easy. To get to the empty floors, whose windows are boarded up, it is necessary to enter a monstrous, uninspected elevator that has to be pulled up by hand, like a dumbwaiter. This is the pivot on which the story's slender plot turns. During all the twenty-two years he has rented the building, Louie has never dared to enter the elevator. Each time he has peered into it he has felt a primal dread:

I just don't want to get in that cage by myself. I got a feeling about it, and that's the fact of the matter. It makes me uneasy—all closed in, and all that furry dust. It makes me think of a coffin, the inside of a coffin. Either that or a cave, the mouth of a cave. If I could get somebody to go along with me, somebody to talk to, just so I wouldn't be all alone in there, I'd go.

“Louie suddenly leaned forward. ‘What about you?’ he asked. ‘Maybe I could persuade you.’”

Mitchell agrees, but before the trip takes place, Louie launches into another aria in which he explains why he has remained in a building he was never keen on and always intended to move from. “It really doesn't make much sense. It's all mixed up with the name of a street in Brooklyn.” The street was Schermerhorn Street near a restaurant Louie waited tables at, Joe's on Nevins Street, one of the great Brooklyn chop-houses, where political bosses ate alongside rich old women of good family of whom Louie says: “They all had some peculiarity, and they all had one foot in the grave, and they all had big appetites.” One of these trencherwomen was a widow named Mrs. Frelinghuysen: “She was very old and tiny and delicate, and she ate like a horse.... Everybody liked her, the way she hung on to life.” She liked Louie in turn, and if his tables were filled would defer her meal until he was free to wait on her. While she ate, he observed her closely:

She'd always start off with one dozen oysters in winter or one dozen clams in summer, and she'd gobble them down and go on from there. She could get more out of a lobster than anybody I ever saw. You'd think she'd got everything she possibly could, and then she'd pull the little legs off that most people don't even bother with, and suck the juice out of them.

During his afternoon break, Louie's recitative continues, he would go over to Schermerhorn Street, a quiet back street, and sit on a bench under a tree and eat fruit he had bought at a nearby fancy-fruit store. One afternoon, it occurs to him to wonder, “Who the hell was Schermerhorn?” So that night at the restaurant he asks Mrs. Frelinghuysen and she tells him that the Schermerhorns are one of the oldest and best Dutch families in New York, and that she had known many of the descendants of the original seventeenth-century settler Jacob Schermerhorn, among them a girl who had died young and whose grave in Trinity Church

Therese Mitchell/Estate of Joseph Mitchell

cemetery in Washington Heights she had visited and “put some jonquils on.”

Where the hell is this going? As in all of Mitchell's pieces everything is always going somewhere, though not necessarily so you'd notice. Mitchell is one of the great masters of the device of the plot twist disguised as a digression that seems pointless but that heightens the effect of unforced realism. Louie tells Mitchell of an incident that occurred a few years after he left Joe's. Mrs. Frelinghuysen had died and Louie had married and bought his restaurant and rented the building it was in. One afternoon a long black limousine pulled up in front of the building and a uniformed chauffeur came into the restaurant and said, “Mrs. Schermerhorn wanted to speak to me, and I looked at him and said, ‘What do you mean—Mrs. Schermerhorn?’ And he said, ‘Mrs. Schermerhorn that owns this building.’” Louie is stunned to hear this. He had assumed the real estate company he paid his rent to was the owner. But no, the beautiful woman who gets out of the limousine, the recently widowed Mrs. Arthur F. Schermerhorn, owns the building. Louie asks her if she knows anything about its history, but she doesn't—she is just inspecting the properties she has inherited from her husband. She drives off and he never sees her again.

I went back inside and stood there and thought it over, and the effect it had on me, the simple fact my building was an old Schermerhorn building, it may sound foolish, but it pleased me very much. The feeling I had, it connected me with the past. It connected me with Old New York.

Louie pursues city records and after many years and many dead ends learns that his building and the identical one next door had been put up in the 1870s by a descendant of Jacob Schermerhorn and combined to form a hotel called the Fulton Ferry Hotel after the ferry to Brooklyn that stood in front of it. From the mid- to late 1800s the hotel flourished. The ferry passengers crowded its saloon, and out-of-town passengers from the steamships docked in the East River along South Street filled its rooms as they waited for passage.

But then one of those disasters occurred by which the life of the city is punctuated and defined, the disaster of change. The Brooklyn Bridge went up, followed by the Manhattan and Williamsburg bridges, which ended the ferry traffic that gave the saloon its trade; then “the worst blow of all,” the passenger lines left South Street for docks on the Hudson and the hotel declined into “one of those waterfront hotels that rummies hole up in, and old men on pensions, and old nuts, and sailors on the beach.” What remained finally were two buildings with boarded-up top floors, one of them occupied by Sloppy Louie's and the other by a saloon no longer in business. Louie concludes his monologue: “Those are the bare bones of the matter. If I could get upstairs just once in that damned old elevator and scratch around in those hotel registers up there and whatever to hell else is stored up there, it might be possible I'd find out a whole lot more.”

As Mitchell and Louie, wearing helmets and carrying flashlights, pull the rope and heave the ancient elevator up to the third floor, the story's lyrical music gives way to harsh new sounds. Louie is no longer the contemplative and generous and worldly-wise man of the monologues. He has become angry and almost hysterically agitated. In the pitch-dark, dust-laden room the elevator opens onto that had been the hotel's reading room and is now stacked with hotel furniture, Louie yanks (Mitchell's word) drawers out of a rolltop desk. “God damn it! I thought I'd find those hotel registers in here. There's nothing in here, only rusty paper clips.” A mirror-topped bureau yields only a stray hairpin and comb and medicine bottle. Louie opens the medicine bottle and smells the colorless liquid in it and



Joseph Mitchell outside Sloppy Louie's restaurant with Louis Morino, the subject of Mitchell's 1952 New Yorker profile 'Up in the Old Hotel'

says disgustedly, “It's gone dead.... It doesn't smell like anything at all.”

The men move on to the hotel bedrooms at the rear of the floor, all empty except for one with an iron bedstead and a placard tacked to the wall saying “The Wages of Sin is Death; but the Gift of God is Eternal Life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Louie has had enough and heads back toward the elevator. Mitchell wants to go up to the other floors but Louie says no. “There's nothing up there.” In the elevator, Louie

was leaning against the side of the cage, and his shoulders were slumped and his eyes were tired. “I didn't learn much I didn't know before,” he said.

“You learned that the wages of sin is death,” I said, trying to say something cheerful.

Louie is not amused. The third floor and the place where there is nothing to look at or read or smell, toward which we are all headed, have evidently become fused in his imagination. He is desperate to get back down to the restaurant. “Come on, pull the rope faster! Pull it faster! Let's get out of this.” Mitchell has circled back to his opening sentence: “Every now and then, seeking to rid my mind of thoughts of death and doom, I get up early and go down to Fulton Fish Market.” The stands heaped with forty to sixty varieties of gleaming fish, “the

smoky riverbank dawn, the racket the fishmongers make, the seaweedy smell, and the sight of this plentifulness” give Mitchell a feeling of well-being, even of elation. But they hardly rid him of his existential anguish.

Mitchell often said that his favorite book was *Ulysses*, but it is another book—Ecclesiastes—that hovers over the pages of *The Bottom of the Harbor*. Like the preacher/narrator of Ecclesiastes, Mitchell is all over the place. He is at once an absurdist and a moralist and a hedonist. All is vanity, there is nothing new under the sun, eat, drink, and be merry. The rhetorical slyness of verse 9:10—“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest”—is almost uncannily consonant

ell runs into Lyons on his way to (what else?) a funeral in his Sunday best, “I was surprised at how distinguished he looked; he looked worldly and cultivated and illustrious.”

An ignorant visitor to Lyons's barge becomes the audience for an exquisitely detailed lecture on the art of shad fishing in the Hudson. And once again Mitchell doesn't do the telling himself, but allows his central character to hold forth in a monologue that goes on for many pages. But this time it isn't the main but a secondary character who delivers Mitchell's message of death and doom. He is Joseph Hewitt, a man in his seventies, a former bookkeeper at the Fulton Fish Market, who has made money from real estate since his retirement, and shouldn't be complaining, but can't tear himself away from the handwriting on the wall:

“Things have worked out very well for you, Joe,” I once heard another retired man remark to him one day... “and you ought to look at things a little more cheerful than you do.” “I'm not so sure I have anything to be cheerful about,” Mr. Hewitt replied. “I'm not so sure you have, either. I'm not so sure anybody has.”

At the beginning of “Mr. Hunter's Grave,” the best known of the pieces in *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Mitchell strolls through a cemetery on Staten Island and examines his feelings. “Invariably, for some reason I don't know and don't want to know, after I have spent an hour or so in one of these cemeteries, looking at gravestone designs and reading inscriptions and identifying wild flowers and scaring rabbits out of the weeds and reflecting on the end that awaits me and awaits us all, my spirits lift, I become quite cheerful....”

Mitchell isn't the only one to find a visit to a graveyard a cheering rather than depressing experience. These places produce a kind of homeopathic effect on the visitor. They make him feel better by giving him a whiff—real or imagined—of the worst. The interconnectedness of what we have to feel cheerful about and what we don't is Mitchell's great subject. The image of old Mrs. Frelinghuysen sucking the juice out of lobster legs can hardly be surpassed as an emblem of the defiant life force.

In “The Rivermen” Mitchell offers the quieter but no less powerful image of old men who have gathered on the banks of the river to see Harry Lyons bring in his catch and to accept from him the eucharistic gift of a roe shad that they wrap in newspapers and carry home in neatly folded paper bags. In the passage in “Joe Gould's Secret” about his own unwritten book, Mitchell quotes an old black street preacher that his young hero meets in Harlem:

Like the Baptist preachers the young reporter had listened to and struggled to understand in his childhood, the old man sees meaning behind meanings, or thinks he does, and tries his best to tell what things “stand for.” “Pomegranates are about the size and shape of large oranges or small grapefruits, only their skins are red,” he says.... “They're filled... with juice as red as blood. When they get ripe, they're so swollen with those juicy red seeds that they gap open and

Therese Mitchell/Estate of Joseph Mitchell

some of the seeds spill out. And now I'll tell you what pomegranates stand for. They stand for the resurrection.... All seeds stand for resurrection and all eggs stand for resurrection. The Easter egg stands for resurrection. So do the eggs in the English sparrow's nest up under the eaves in the "L" station. So does the egg you have for breakfast. So does the caviar the rich people eat. So does shad roe.

Images that "stand for something" recur throughout Mitchell's writing and reinforce the sense that we are reading a single metaphoric work about the city. That the author was a southerner only heightens its authority. As Robert Frank's European sensibility permitted him to see things as he traveled around America that had been invisible to the rest of us, so Mitchell's outsidership gave him his own X-ray vision.

Joseph Kunkel's biography adds some telling details to what Mitchell's readers already know about his childhood as the eldest son of a prosperous cotton and tobacco grower in North Carolina.* Perhaps the most striking of these is Mitchell's trouble with arithmetic—he couldn't add, subtract, or multiply to save his soul—to which handicap we may owe the fact that he became a writer rather than a farmer. As Mitchell recalled late in life:

You know you have to be extremely good at arithmetic. You have to be able to figure, as my father said, to deal with cotton futures, and to buy cotton. You're in competition with a group of men who will cut your throat at any moment, if they can see the value of a bale of cotton closer than you. I couldn't do it, so I had to leave.

Mitchell studied at the University of North Carolina without graduating and came to New York in 1929, at the age of twenty-one. Kunkel traces the young exile's rapid rise from copy boy on the *New York World* to reporter on the *Herald Tribune* and feature writer on *The World Telegram*. In 1933 St. Clair McKelway, the managing editor of the eight-year-old *New Yorker*, noticed Mitchell's newspaper work and invited him to write for the magazine; in 1938 the editor, Harold Ross, hired him. In 1931 Mitchell married a lovely woman of Scandinavian background named Therese Jacobson, a fellow reporter, who left journalism to become a fine though largely unknown portrait and street photographer. She and Mitchell lived in a small apartment in Greenwich Village and raised two daughters, Nora and Elizabeth. Kunkel's biography is sympathetic and admiring and discreet. If any of the erotic secrets that frequently turn up in the nets of biographers turned up in Kunkel's, he does not reveal them. He has other fish to gut.

From reporting notes, journals, and correspondence, and from three interviews Mitchell gave late in life to a professor of journalism named Norman Sims, Kunkel extracts a picture of Mitchell's journalistic practice that he doesn't know quite what to do with. On

the one hand, he doesn't regard it as a pretty picture; he uses terms like "license," "latitude," "dubious technique," "tactics," and "bent journalistic rules" to describe it. On the other, he reveres Mitchell's writing, and doesn't want to say anything critical of it even while he is saying it. So a kind of weird embarrassed atmosphere hangs over the passages in which Kunkel reveals Mitchell's radical departures from factuality.

It is already known that the central character of the book *Old Mr. Flood*, a ninety-three-year-old man named Hugh G. Flood, who intended to live to the age of 115 by eating only fish and shellfish, did not exist, but was a "composite," i.e., an invention. Mitchell was forced to characterize him as such after readers of the *New Yorker* pieces from which the book was derived tried to find the man. "Mr. Flood is not one man," Mitchell wrote in an author's note to the book, and went on, "Combined in him are aspects of several old men who work or hang out in Fulton Fish Market, or who did in the past." In the *Up in the Old Hotel* collection he simply reclassified the work as fiction.

Now Kunkel reveals that another Mitchell character—a gypsy king named Cockeye Johnny Nikanov, the subject of a *New Yorker* profile published in 1942—was also an invention. How Kunkel found this out is rather funny. He came upon a letter that Mitchell wrote in 1961 to *The New Yorker's* lawyer, Milton Greenstein, asking Greenstein for legal advice on how to stop a writer named Sidney Sheldon from producing a musical about gypsy life based on Mitchell's profile of Nikanov and a subsequent piece about the scams of gypsy women.

"Cockeye Johnny Nikanov does not exist in real life, and never did," Mitchell told Greenstein. Therefore "no matter how true to life Cockeye Johnny happens to be, he is a fictional character, and I invented him, and he is not in 'the public domain,' he is mine." Mitchell's Gilbertian logic evidently prevailed—Sheldon gave up his musical. But the secret of Johnny Nikanov's wobbly ontological status—though Greenstein kept quiet about it—had passed out of Mitchell's possession. It now belonged to tattling posterity, the biographer's best friend.

What Kunkel found in Mitchell's reporting notes for his famous piece "Mr. Hunter's Grave" made him even more nervous. It now appears that that great work of nonfiction is also in some part a work of fiction. The piece opens with an encounter in the St. Luke's cemetery on Staten Island between Mitchell and a minister named Raymond E. Brock, who tells him about a remarkable black man named Mr. Hunter, and sets in motion the events that bring Mitchell to Hunter's house a week later. But the notes show that the encounter in the cemetery never took place. In actuality, it was a man sitting on his front porch named James McCoy (who never appears in the piece) who told Mitchell about Mr. Hunter years before Mitchell met him; and when Mitchell did meet Hunter it was in a church and not at his house.

This and other instances in the reporting notes about Mitchell's tamperings with actuality cause Kunkel to ask: "Should the reputation of 'Mr. Hunter's Grave' suffer for the license Mitchell employed in telling it?" He

adds primly: "As with any aspect of art, that is up to the appraiser."

The obvious answer to Kunkel's question—the one that most journalists, editors, and professors of journalism would give—is yes, of course, the reputation of "Mr. Hunter's Grave" should suffer now that we know that Mitchell cheated. He has betrayed the reader's trust that what he is reading is what actually happened. He has mixed up nonfiction with fiction. He has made an unwholesome, almost toxic brew out of the two genres. It is too bad he is dead and can't be pilloried. Or perhaps it is all right that he is dead, because he is suffering the torments of hell for his sins against the spirit of fact. And so on.

As a former journalist and professor of journalism (he is now president of St. Norbert College in De Pere,

Joseph Mitchell



Wisconsin), Kunkel might be expected to share these dire views; but as Mitchell's biographer, he can't bring himself to express them. He clearly disapproves of Mitchell's "tactics," but he venerates Mitchell and hates to show him up as Mitchell hated showing up Joe Gould. His own tactic is to invoke the pieties of journalism. "Of course, today's *New Yorker*, or any mainstream publication, would never knowingly permit such liberties with quotation; they would take a dimmer-yet view of composites being billed as 'non-fiction.'" And: "The dubious technique would not really disappear from the print media's bag of tricks until the general elevation of journalistic standards several decades later."

Kunkel magnanimously excuses Mitchell and other of the early *New Yorker* writers for their subprime practices because they didn't know any better. Of course, Mitchell and his *New Yorker* colleagues such as A. J. Liebling knew very well what they were doing. On October 14, 1988, Mitchell told Norman Sims:

My desire is to get the reader, well, first of all to read it. That story ["The Bottom of the Harbor"] was hard to write because I had to wonder how long can I keep developing it before the reader's going to get tired of this. Here and there, as I think a fiction writer would, I put things that I know—even the remark the tugboat men make, that you could bottle this water and sell it for poison—that are going to keep the reader going. I can lure him or her into the story I want to tell. I can't tell the story I want to tell until I've got you into the pasture and

down where the sheep are. Where the shepherd is. He's going to tell the story, but I've got to get you past the ditch and through these bushes.

Every writer of nonfiction who has struggled with the ditch and the bushes knows what Mitchell is talking about, but few of us have gone as far as Mitchell in bending actuality to our artistic will. This is not because we are more virtuous than Mitchell. It is because we are less gifted than Mitchell. The idea that reporters are constantly resisting the temptation to invent is a laughable one. Reporters don't invent because they don't know how to. This is why they are journalists rather than novelists or short-story writers. They depend on the kindness of the strangers they actually meet for the characters in their stories. There are no fictional characters lurking in their imaginations. They couldn't create a character like Mr. Flood or Cockeye Johnny if you held a gun to their heads. Mitchell's travels across the line that separates fiction and nonfiction are his singular feat. His impatience with the annoying, boring bits of actuality, his slashings through the underbrush of unreadable facticity, give his pieces their electric force, are why they're so much more exciting to read than the work of other nonfiction writers of ambition.

In the title piece of *The Bottom of the Harbor*, a short work of great subtlety about the ability of fish and shellfish to survive in polluted water, Mitchell mentions a small area of the New York waterfront where, in contrast to the general foulness, "clean, sparkling, steel-blue water" can be found. This image of purity in the midst of contamination could serve as an emblem of Mitchell's journalistic exceptionalism. He has filtered out the impurities other journalists helplessly accept as the defining condition of their genre. Mitchell's genre is some kind of hybrid, as yet to be named.

Kunkel pauses to shake his head about "a strain of perfectionism" in Mitchell, "an obsession for his writing to be just so." "Mitchell would patiently cast and recast sentences, sometimes dozens of times, changing just a word or two with each iteration until an entire paragraph came together and seemed right," Kunkel wonderingly writes, and adds, "All this fussing was exceedingly time-consuming, even for a magazine writer." Kunkel's naiveté about writing is evident, but his picture of Mitchell at work only confirms and amplifies our sense of his artistry.

Much has been made of the fact that after "Joe Gould's Secret" Mitchell published nothing in *The New Yorker*, though he came to the office regularly, and colleagues passing his door could hear him typing. I was a colleague and friend, and I always assumed that the reason he wasn't publishing was because he wasn't satisfied with what he was writing: he had been producing work of increasing beauty and profundity, and now the standard he had set for himself was too high. Mitchell spoke of James Joyce, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Ivan Turgenev, D. H. Lawrence, and T. S. Eliot as writers he read and reread. This was the company he was in behind his closed door. We should respect his inhibiting reverence for literary transcendence and be grateful for the work that got past his censor. □

*See the posthumous "Days in the Branch," *The New Yorker*, December 1, 2014, part of an unfinished memoir.

LETTERS

‘SHAKESPEARE IN TEHRAN’

To the Editors:

I am sorry to see an article by my colleague Professor Stephen Greenblatt in your journal titled “Shakespeare in Tehran” [NYR, April 2] whose content is a departure from the views he expressed while he was in Iran.

Thus, I am somewhat bewildered by the article especially regarding some of what I believe to be unfounded or exaggerated claims about Iran and Iranians.

Regarding the less important issue, meaning his flawed characterization of my personality and my writings (without mentioning my name), all I need to say is that his quotes were taken out of context from my articles. The central theme of my writings that he alluded to is the injustice of the sanctions imposed on the Iranian civilians largely due to the Israeli lobby in the United States. I am definitely not alone in my criticism of such fundamental violations of basic human rights against Iranian women and children.

The purpose of the Shakespeare Conference in Iran that I managed was to bring people of different nationalities together but unfortunately the professor chose to do the opposite.

However, what surprises me the most was that my colleague readily accepted my offer to lecture at the University of Tehran whereas he had full access to all my articles. And if I am what he accuses me of being, why did he accept the invitation in the first place? Perhaps he may be feeling some heat after returning home.

Dear editor, as you have published his biased article, which I see as an affront to Iran and the Iranian nation, I kindly request you to publish this note as a response to his writing.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Dr. Ismail Salami

Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Tehran
Tehran, Iran

Stephen Greenblatt replies:

I am very happy to respond to the letter from Dr. Salami, from whose articles I quoted in my essay. Dr. Salami’s views on Israel are hardly surprising, and not only in his part of the world. It was only the extravagant rhetoric in which he couched these views—Zionism’s diabolical tentacles spreading over the globe, etc.—that gave me pause when I read his articles before I left for Tehran. And even here I only brought them up in order to contrast them to the graciousness, hospitality, and wide-ranging intellectual curiosity that I encountered in him, in his colleagues, and in the splendid, truly impressive students.

I cannot fully account for the contrast, but at least in part—or so I suggested—it has to do with the way in which Shakespeare provided a place for an open, free, and honest conversation across borders. Another part of the explanation, I recognize, might well lie in what in Persian is called *t’aarof*, the code of civility that I repeatedly remarked in my hosts and many others whom I met and that made my visit to Iran so deeply gratifying. I acknowledge, of course, that I may have violated that code by bringing up the sometimes painful differences in our perspectives, but how else can we hope to establish a secure basis for mutual understanding and respect?

‘GOOD FAITH & THE SCHOOLS’

To the Editors:

I read the exchange between Joel Klein and Jonathan Zimmerman concerning me [Letters, NYR, April 2]. I want to set the record

straight. Klein claims, “Early on, Ravitch pushed me to hire her partner to run a training program.” When Joel Klein was hired as chancellor by Michael Bloomberg in 2002, my partner was executive director of the New York City Board of Education’s principal leadership program, hired by Chancellor Harold O. Levy. That fall, the program won \$3 million in a federal competition as one of the nation’s best leadership training programs. Klein decided to disband her program and transfer its funding to a new, \$75 million principal training program run by a businessman from Denver. I did not ask Klein to put her in charge of his Leadership Academy. She stayed on for a year as a vice-president of the Leadership Academy, then retired, having worked in the school system for more than thirty years.



Drawing by Edward Gorey

I did not save my e-mails from thirteen years ago. However a third party did read them. Before Klein’s departure at the end of 2010, I was informed by the legal office of the Department of Education that *The Wall Street Journal* had requested the correspondence between him and me, perhaps having heard the allegations he made here and in his book. The reporter never wrote a story, I presume because there was none.

As Zimmerman noted, I explained my reasons for disagreeing with Klein’s policies and reorganizations in two books and many articles. My reasons were professional, not personal. At no time have I ever expressed personal animus toward Klein or Mayor Bloomberg. I personally like former Mayor Bloomberg and admire many of the changes he brought to the city.

Diane Ravitch
New York City

WHERE TO START CHANGE

To the Editors:

Michael Walzer [“Is the Right Choice a Good Bargain?,” NYR, March 5] points to a central problem with Cass Sunstein’s perspective: the assumption that what is needed is to improve procedures of group decision-making in order to increase the likelihood of making “right” choices about ends, which are conceived as givens. This is technical rationality, which holds ends to be fixed and concentrates on efficiency of means. As Walzer observes, Sunstein misses the larger, and more important, questions of real politics in which ends themselves are subject to an ongoing process of negotiation, debate, and reformulation. Yet Walzer himself also conceives of change-oriented, citizen-involving politics as targeting institutions more than transforming them. To address the problems of politics in today’s world we need more than agitation from outside institutional life, the “system world” in the language of Jürgen Habermas, long a rhetorical reference point for Sunstein.

Sunstein, like Habermas and many others, sees major institutions as largely fixed and unchangeable, not subject to democratizing change. This assumption generates fatalism, which has shrunk our imaginations about decision-making, politics, and democracy itself. The challenge is to recognize that institutions of all kinds are human creations that in turn can be recreated, reconnected to questions of civic and democratic purpose. For this task we need to bring in Max Weber as well as Machiavelli and Marx. Weber described the “iron cage” that results from technical rationality. In his essay “The Profession and the Vocation of Politics,” Weber also evocatively termed the pattern “the polar night of icy darkness.” Thawing the polar night is a frontier of democracy in the twenty-first century.

Harry Boyte, Augsburg College, St. Paul, Minnesota; **Albert Dzur**, Bowling Green University, Bowling Green, Ohio; **Peter Levine**, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts

Michael Walzer replies:

I certainly agree, and so would Sunstein and Reid Hastie, that it’s a good idea to read Max Weber; and I also agree, and so would they, that political and economic institutions are human creations. As they were formed, so they can be reformed and transformed. Since Professors Boyte, Dzur, and Levine don’t tell us which institutions they want to transform, I can’t say whether I am ready to join them. Meanwhile, important decisions are still being made inside institutions, like the US Congress and its committees, for example, or inside the White House, and I can’t see what is wrong with trying to influence those decisions to make them more serviceable to ordinary Americans. I don’t think that will happen, or happen in significant ways, until those ordinary Americans organize themselves to bring pressure on the institutional decisions-makers. These writers want something more than that, but that much, these days, would be well worth celebrating.

THE QUASI-HOLY SECRETS

To the Editors:

Thank you for Steve Coll’s thoughtful review of James Risen’s book *Pay Any Price: Greed, Power, and Endless War* [NYR, February 19]. Underremarked in these discussions is that the overwhelming bulk of classification is needless.

As someone inside the system, my personal experience may not be representative. I see high levels of classification on activities that if known would mostly be embarrassing for lateness, technical and scientific shallowness, and inadequacy. (I once enjoyed having a distinguished guest scientist with appropriate clearances confidently tell me that something we were already doing, using commercial components, was impossible.)

Whatever my personal experience, there are two fundamental problems with classification. First, it is rarely if ever contested. (In thirty-five years, I know of only a single case, and that was because the program authorities were trying to make a Gaussian distribution—a bell curve—top secret. It still took six months of dedicated work to rescind the classification.) Any system in which restriction is almost never challenged is biased toward restriction. Even fewer constraints exist on use of “OUO”—official use only—which bars release of the marked material under Freedom of Information Act requests. Last week I saw it on a proposal to store experimental data in a database. I suppose that was another defense from embarrassment, that taxpayers shouldn’t know that we’ve been doing expensive experiments for decades and haven’t systematically saved the data.

The second problem is culture. A closed culture, where only those inside can decide

who else to let in, and which in general treats its mission as quasi-holy, shares characteristics with a cult. If prestige is strongly associated with access and what you know, then your bias is to classify to that level, regardless of merit. You will see merit if sufficiently motivated.

At a meeting with senior scientists at a national laboratory, I was told that an information system I built to help international analysts identify a particular nuclear security problem couldn’t mention the problem the system was meant to help with. If it did, it would have to be classified. OK to tell the analysts everything they needed to know to assess and understand the problem; but not what the problem actually was. Which they could find on Wikipedia.

James Kornell
Santa Barbara, California

FIDDLING WITH THE ROOF

To the Editors:

I appreciate that Robert Brustein admired my writing and research for *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* [NYR, December 18, 2014], but am beyond bewildered that he found it “bewildering” that anyone should write seriously about the musical. Rather than take on the arc and argument of my book, he resuscitates his fifty-year-old charge that in *Fiddler* “the fullness and depth of the source material” was not “sufficiently preserved on the stage.” All one can say is, “Nu? Voden?” (Yes, and so...?) Such are the perils of adapting work from one medium to another: the literary nuances of Sholem Aleichem’s masterful stories (which I discuss at length in my book) are lost as new musical-theatrical pleasures are found. (See *Kiss Me Kate*, *West Side Story*, *Pal Joey*, *A Connecticut Yankee*, etc.)

As I detail, the show takes liberties with the often dark stories. But rather than stop with the obvious academic point, I explore how a Broadway show, of all things, became a global touchstone for Jewish identity, ethnic cohesion, generational conflict, and origin stories, and contributed to the invention of the shtetl as an idyllic Ashkenazi memory site. From Sholem Aleichem’s own (highly melodramatic) dramatization of the Tevye stories, through many adaptations before *Fiddler* and since, Tevye has been a screen onto which Jews have projected their desire for a usable past. These are among my book’s themes. But you’d never know it from Brustein’s quaint effort to rescue Sholem Aleichem from the musical’s success. (Contrary to his baseless accusation that the show usurped the stories, it did much to keep English translations available; they were out of print when *Fiddler*’s authors set out to adapt them.)

In his ardor, Brustein gets significant facts wrong, and even makes some up—too much to detail in the space allotted here. Briefly: wrong that Sholem Aleichem returned to Ukraine after his disastrous effort to strike it rich in New York’s Yiddish theater (he went to Western Europe); wrong that Midge Decter excoriated *Fiddler* in the pieces cited in my book (she was discussing an earlier, nonmusical play by Arnold Perl); egregiously wrong that Sheldon Harnick rewrote his lyrics to accommodate LGBTQ, African-American, and gentle performers of the musical or that any book so claimed. (What Harnick did, bless him, was tweak “Sunrise, Sunset” for use at same-sex weddings.) Wrong that *Wonder of Wonders* has little to say about the show’s afterlife—a full third addresses how *Fiddler* found cultural utility in Israel, Poland, a predominantly African-American school in Brooklyn, contemporary pop culture, even Jewish ritual practice.

Brustein quotes, twice, from a cover note Sholem Aleichem attached to a script submitted to Jacob Adler and Boris Tomashevsky: “I will never permit myself to give in to American taste and lower

the standards of art.” Brustein must have skipped the page after my reference to this letter, where I show how Sholem Aleichem followed up: he mailed off a revised draft with a new, sensationalistic fifth act that sought precisely to give in to American taste. He desperately wanted a hit.

Alisa Solomon
New York City

Robert Brustein replies:

There’s an immortal line—actually it’s from my recent Klezmer musical, *The King of Second Avenue*—where an actor says “I do not prostitute my art—except in starring roles.”

Surely Ms. Solomon can distinguish between the ideal and the reality when it comes to selling out. A lot of artists at one time or another—including me—have been tempted to allow his or her work to be compromised for the sake of money or celebrity, and a lot of artists—including Sholem Aleichem—have yielded to that temptation. So did Zero Mostel when asked to perform the part of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Although he found the piece unworthy of his talents, his wife needed a fur coat.

Arrangements of this kind are especially seductive when money, not quality, is what a culture most values. But few authors toast the room when their work is being commercialized, no matter how much it elevates the level of their hedge funds. That *Fiddler on the Roof* proved to be considerably more lucrative than *Tevye and His Daughters* is beyond dispute. But is that a reason for a gifted drama critic such as Alisa Solomon to expend so much time, energy, and scholarship, not to mention over four hundred pages of type, over the making and marketing of a Broadway musical?

This is a particularly poignant question in an age when Shakespeare is rarely studied in the schools, when the Greek dramatists are barely staged in theaters, and when great modern playwrights cannot fairly get a hearing without the benefit of a Broadway score. As for *Fiddler* being a touchstone of Jewish identity, there is more authentic Jewishness to be found in the appetizer section of Zabar’s.

I apologize to readers, editors, and Ms. Solomon for any factual errors that may have slipped into my article, as, for example, whether Sholem Aleichem spent his later life in the Ukraine or in Geneva. But my central point remains that theater critics, during this sad moment in our cultural history, should be honoring the best expression of an author’s work, instead of celebrating his or her compromises, however lyrical.

BLASPHEMY IN NORWAY

To the Editors:

Several Norwegian readers* have commented on a confusing reference to recent hate speech legislation in my article “Norway: The Two Faces of Extremism” [*NYR*, March 5]. To clarify, Norwegian law has long drawn a distinction between “racist” or defamatory speech against individuals, on the one hand, and defamatory speech against a religion, or “blasphemy,” on the other.

The 2009 legislation I mentioned did not concern hate speech against individuals (section 135a of the Norwegian penal code) but rather a proposal to reinstate the country’s long-dormant blasphemy law (section 142), which prohibited “any word or deed [that] publicly insults or shows contempt for any religion whose practice [in Norway] is permitted.” The proposal was killed after it came under concerted attack both by the right-wing website Document.no and by online activists on the left. In contrast, new penalties for hate speech against indi-

viduals were in fact introduced in 2005, and included in the revised penal code passed by Parliament in 2009; however the reforms have not yet taken effect.

It is worth noting the extent to which debate in Norway about both kinds of defamation have related to the country’s growing Muslim community. As with blasphemy laws in other countries (including, today, in a number of predominantly Muslim countries like Pakistan), the Norwegian blasphemy law was originally intended to protect the majority religion; Norway was at the time an overwhelmingly Lutheran state. The law was rarely used, however, and its application to minority religions largely untested. During the Salman Rushdie affair in 1988–1989, some Muslim groups in Norway tried to invoke the law to have Rushdie’s book banned, but the effort failed.

Despite the pending reforms to hate speech law, meanwhile, Norway has a notably strong tradition of free expression, and a broad consensus has emerged, particularly in the years since the 2011 Breivik attacks, that unrestricted speech is salutary to open democracy. To some liberal commentators, however, this tendency has led to growing hostility toward the Muslim community in particular, with the press and television devoting disproportionate attention to the statements of extremists at the expense of more representative voices.

Hugh Eakin
New York City

BLACK & WHITE ZAMBIA

To the Editors:

I’m troubled by Helen Epstein’s characterization of white/black relations in Zambia on the eve of independence in 1964 [“Colossal Corruption in Africa,” *NYR*, December 4, 2014]. My experience as news editor in charge of the startup daily *Zambia Times* in 1964 was very different in key ways. My purpose is not to defend British rule and racial discrimination—it was real—but Epstein overstates the Zambian/Northern Rhodesian case when she draws an analogy to apartheid South Africa. She writes:

On the eve of independence in 1964, 2 percent of Zambia’s 3.5 million people were white, but they controlled everything in a system resembling apartheid. In the lucrative copper mines, blacks were barred from management jobs, and had separate toilets and changing facilities. In the towns, blacks lived in separate neighborhoods, had separate cinemas, were banned from white areas after 5:00 PM without a pass, were forbidden to ride in the front passenger seat of a car driven by a white woman, and could not enter white shops but had to make purchases through a hatch in the wall.

I arrived in 1963 and covered the breakup of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland that opened the way to majority rule and independence. I covered the first non-racial election in 1964 that chose the UNIP’s Kenneth Kaunda over the ANC’s Harry Nkumbula to lead the independent country. And I covered the independence celebration with my colleagues: white, black, mixed-race, Zambian, Rhodesian, fugitive South African, Brits, Scots, etc.

I lived and worked in Kitwe, a hub of the Copperbelt. My black/nonwhite colleagues lived anywhere they could afford and they were well paid. When I first arrived, I stayed with a black family in an otherwise white-majority neighborhood. Yes, there

were black townships, but those were mine company communities. Other neighborhoods were mixed: white, black, Asian, etc., using the categories of the time.

White schools had opened to nonwhite students. I delivered a black colleague’s sons to the local and formerly all-white high school on opening day. No one was banned from any area at any time. There was no pass law. As for driving, Epstein is wrong. There seemed to be little more than social distance that determined generally who rode where. My white female colleagues and black or mixed-race colleagues rode together in the front seats; there was no issue.

Standard Trading and other stores had abandoned discriminatory retail practices and anyone could walk in, try on clothes, or shop. The same was true of the modern Edinburgh Hotel and its dining rooms as well as the colonial-era Nkana Hotel. Anything



Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother receiving flowers from local twin girls during a visit to Northern Rhodesia’s copper belt, 1957

else would have been insane in the months before independence under majority rule.

The rest of her review was fascinating and I have my own experience with Lonrho and Tiny Rowland, a central villain in the books under review. He bought and closed our paper. He also bought the competing *Northern News* from the South African Argus group. I took my generous “golden handshake” rather than work for his merged enterprise. After helping with the transition, I left Zambia.

Ben L. Kaufman
Cincinnati, Ohio

Helen Epstein replies:

I thank Mr. Kaufman for allowing me to make a clarification. I used the term “eve of independence” too loosely, and should have explained that I was referring to conditions prevailing in the 1950s, not the early 1960s. The account of an apartheid-like system in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) comes from Andrew Sardanis’s description of Chingola, the mining town where he settled in 1950:

The town had two shopping centers set a couple of miles apart. . . . Blacks were not allowed inside a shop in the first-class shopping centre. They could buy from there, if they wanted something specific, but they were served from the back yard, through a hatch in the wall. Some years later, a black friend, Robinson Puta, paid for a bed at the hatch and refused to go inside to collect it. He insisted that it be given to

him through the hatch. . . . But that was in the late 1950s. No such cheek in the year I arrived.¹

According to Sardanis, Chingola was not unique. “Each town was subdivided into black and white areas separated by huge tracts of no man’s land.” Blacks weren’t allowed to build their own houses, but lived in windowless shacks built by the mining companies, where they weren’t even allowed to grow maize on their tiny house plots. There was no entertainment for them, except beer halls, so heavy drinking was rife. Only in the late 1950s were coloreds (mixed-race people, but not blacks) allowed into the white movie theaters, and they had to sit in special blocks of seats near the front.

Until 1963, there were even separate ministries for Europeans (Ministry of European Education, Ministry of European Agriculture, and Ministry of European Health²), and in the 1950s, “racial discrimination in skilled trades was total.” Blacks were paid less for the same work, had to call white men and women “Bwana” and “Donna,” etc.

But change was on its way. Chingola’s first black secondary school opened in the late 1950s, and an Indian family settled in a European area at around the same time, despite the howls of whites who petitioned the local authorities to keep them out. Goodwin Mumba confirms that laws mandating segregation of train cars, public toilets, hospitals, and shopping centers were on the books until 1963, as was a law forbidding blacks to ride in the front seat of cars driven by whites.³ No doubt enforcement of these laws would have been lax to nonexistent in the last years of the independence movement, so I’m not surprised that Mr. Kaufman had a very different impression of the country when he arrived in 1963, one year before majority rule.

CORRECTIONS

In David Cole’s article “Can They Crush Obamacare?” [*NYR*, March 19], owing to an error at the Redux photo agency, the location of the Tea Party protest was incorrect. It was held on the West Lawn of the Capitol, not the White House.

In Ian Bostridge’s “The Magic in Schubert’s Songs” [*NYR*, April 2], “the greatest lied pianist from the 1930s to the 1970s” was Gerald Moore. In Martin Filler’s “New York: Conspicuous Construction” [*NYR*, April 2], while SHoP Architects’ building at 111 West 57th Street has a glass curtain wall facing the park, its façade is predominantly terra cotta and bronze.

¹Africa: *Another Side of the Coin: Northern Rhodesia’s Final Years and Zambia’s Statehood* (I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 21.

²Andrew Sardanis, *Zambia: The First Fifty Years* (I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 20.

³Goodwin Yoram Mumba, *The 1980 Coup: Tribulations of the One-Party State in Zambia* (Lusaka: UNZA Press, 2012), p. 8.

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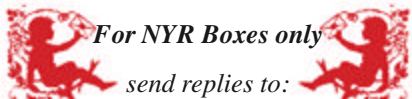
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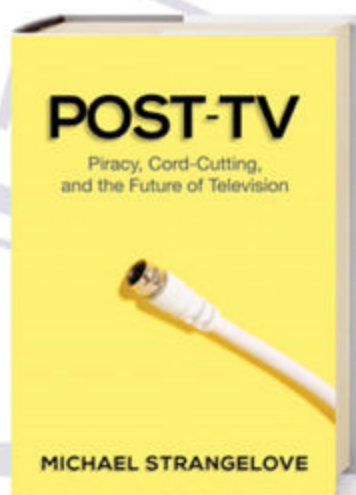
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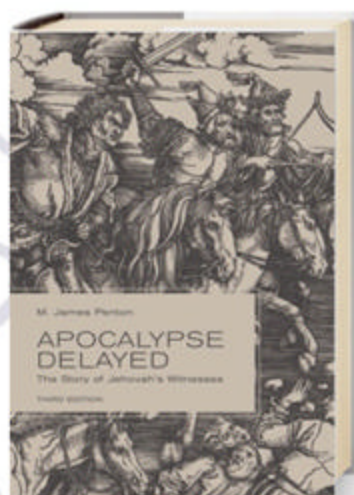


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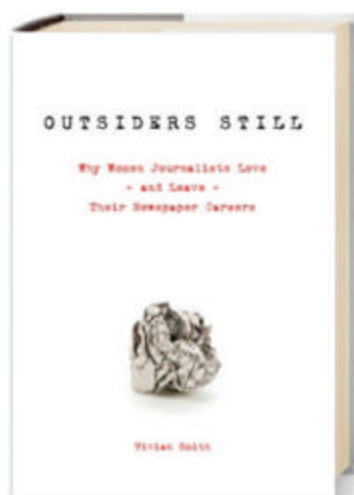


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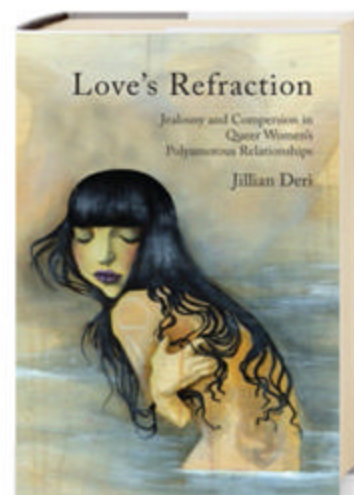


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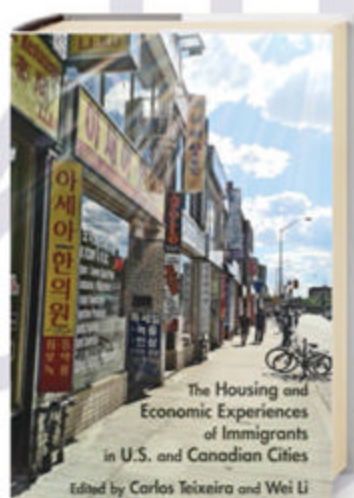


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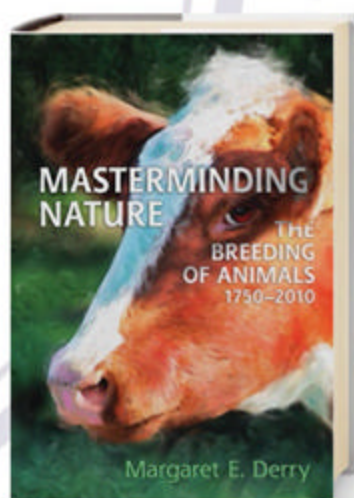
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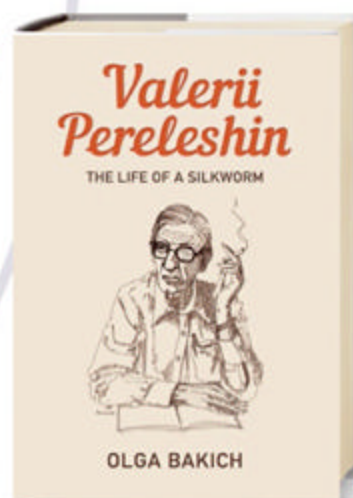


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